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YOUNG FELIX

FRANK SWINNERTON

By FRANK SWINNERTON

YOUNG FELIX
THE THREE LOVERS
COQUETTE
SEPTEMBER
SHOPS AND HOUSES
NOCTURNE
THE CHASTE WIFE
ON THE STAIRCASE
THE HAPPY FAMILY
THE CASEMENT
THE YOUNG IDEA
THE MERRY HEART

GEORGE GISSING: *A Critical Study*

R. L. STEVENSON: *A Critical Study*

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BY

FRANK SWINNERTON



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PART ONE: THE CHILD



YOUNG FELIX

CHAPTER I: THE BABY

i

WE have our first glimpse of Felix Hunter at the age of two years. He is sitting alone upon the bottom step of a flight of stairs, watching through the opaque glass panes of a front door the shadows of two bailiffs who vainly knock to be let into the house. One plump finger is held dictatorially in the air, and the baby lips frame a warning.

"Hush!" says Felix.

Relics of the singular creature belonging to earlier months in his career—for example, the true story of his birth itself—survive still; but they are too intimate for public recitation. It is true that before Felix was born his father and mother both wished that he might be a girl-baby, and this common desire may have had some effect upon his temperament. I leave it to others to decide, but there are facts which support this notion. He had all his life, that is to say, the mental adroitness of a woman. On the other hand he was cursed with a scrupulous personal integrity which later researches among members of the complementary sex led him to suppose purely masculine. Why he was named Felix, nobody knew. It was probably the result of vagary: certainly of some ignorance of the meaning of Christian names, for his arrival in the world came at a time when his

parents could not afford to have a second baby. Our picture of him, indeed, may be regarded as symbolic; for all his life Felix was engaged in sitting upon a bottom stair, cheerily in the face of danger averting the sense of catastrophe by some appropriate *mot*. His name was thus by slow degrees justified. His personal motto should have been something in a dead language meaning "Happy in Disaster."

The life of Felix was one long series of disasters—and one long happiness. He touched nothing that he did not in the end bring about his ears. A wit, a most perceptive wit, once suddenly asked: "How is Felix? Still triumphing from failure to failure?" But Felix never heard this insult. If he had heard it, perhaps his infectious grin might have clouded. The grin he always wore; but otherwise his face was painstakingly insignificant. Asked to describe the man in his early middle life, a close observer, eloquent upon the character of Felix, was forced to admit that he could not remember what his friend was like. "Oh," he said, vaguely. "A face, you know . . . and a grin." But at the age of two Felix was a distinguished baby. He had a mop of rather curly copper-coloured hair (which his mother described for some reason as bronze), two eyes almost hazel in a pure light, a large mouth, small ears, delicate hands, and an air of fat complacency. In spite of insufficient nourishment he remained fat for some years, and had the fat person's love of a comfortable chair all his life. He was not an epicurean; there was very little sensuality about him; but he was always ready to sit down and talk. Once, when he was walking with his grandmother, he observed a pleasant doorstep just as his companion was about to cross the road. "Wind, Gawa," he said, seating himself, and pointing to a distant vehicle. "Horteth." The lisp clung to him to the end, also the agility of mind which enabled him to create a reason for

his brief rest. It was not that he was lacking in vitality. He was not easily tired. It was just that he was what is called "bone lazy." He loved physical comfort. And he was a born contemplative.

Felix, being a contemplative, was not therefore a philosopher. He had no philosophy. He met disaster with cheerfulness; but this was not from philosophical fortitude, but merely because he had never really counted upon anything but disaster. He honestly believed that he deserved nothing better. Any flicker of good-fortune, any mocking will-o'-the-wisp, which would have intoxicated another man into pride of his own powers, made Felix garrulous and expository; but it did not change the orientation of his native view. He expected disaster, and disaster came. Then Felix went on to something else, again to meet disaster. I should have called this book "The Unfortunate Traveller" if an early genius of English letters had not already used that title. I have perhaps said enough upon this point, for, after all, events which will presently be retailed show more clearly than any explanation could do what is the truth about the wretched Felix; but I am afraid that the glamour of the man's insensibility to misfortune may create a false air of triumph for him, and that is why I erect a preliminary finger-post. You must remember that Felix was always as clever as the devil. He could always prove anybody wrong in argument, just for sport. If he had the least notion that I was writing a book about him he would demand the manuscript, would read it with attention, and would then say: "What a paradoxical fellow you are, Swinnerton! Clever, I grant. Nobody doubts your cleverness, except the people who take you seriously. But this . . . I quite agree that I'm unfortunate. You've understood, as nobody else has done, the intrinsic sadness of my life. But damn it, man, your book makes it seem

as though my life had been 'roses, roses all the way.' It hasn't. It's been a struggle with adversity, as you say. Now, what you *ought* to have said . . .” And he would ingeniously re-write my book for me, and discourage me and no book would appear. That is exactly what a quick intelligence will always do. A quick intelligence is always destructive. It is fiendish in its power to make all human endeavour seem futile. I once read a Russian novel which told the story of Lazarus after he had been raised from the dead. The knowledge of death was in his eyes, and upon whomsoever he looked he cast that same terrible knowledge. That is what Felix does—but he does it with ridicule. He looks at a thing one has done, and one is immediately defensive. One hides a vanity, knowing one's own weakness afresh through instinctive fear of his perception of it. Whatever he examines withers. His first wife once said, before she left him: “You know, if you weren't very nice indeed, you'd be *horrible!*”

All this time we have left Felix sitting on the bottom stair, looking at menacing shadows without being afraid. He did not really sit there too long, for the men went away, and the Hunter household celebrated their departure by general relaxation. There was Ma, and Auntie Lallums, and Godfrey, and Felix. Godfrey was seven. Ma was thirty-two, and Auntie Lallums was some sort of age entitling her to be regarded as adult, but no more. Pa was not there. Nor were Grumps and Gran'ma. Only these four people were in the house when the shadows came. Felix lifted a great voice of laughter now that his feeling of constraint and suspense was removed. That made them all laugh, for this family laughed most of the time, a fact which enabled them to live during periods of considerable stress. Felix, even when he wept at all, never wept for long, because he did not cry when he was hurt, and if he cried from one of his passionate rages

his mother, after trying to keep serious, could not repress a giggle, which made Felix giggle also, and thump her; and so the damage to his temper was repaired. Crying was never greatly encouraged among the Hunters. There seemed no time for it. Once, a couple of years later in life, Felix fell the entire length of the stairs upon which he was sitting when this book began. His mother, sure of his death, rushed in horror to the scene, to find her younger son gulping down tears of acute physical distress, and rubbing himself. When gathered to his feet for comfort, Felix made the rueful comment: "I *do* have a game with you, don't I, Ma!"

You see in this another example of his power to achieve the *mot* even in the height of disaster. What a child! I despair of making him appear real. But how great does the difficulty become in describing later years. Here the succession of *mots* (and of introductory disasters) becomes so inexhaustible that I am afraid of my narrative degenerating into a mere commonplace book of felicitous sayings. I am quite sure that Felix will rival Charles the Second upon his death-bed. But by the time his last days are reached perhaps I too shall be dead; and in any case this book will be ended, so that unchecked by me Felix can shock the mourners (if there are any) by his appropriate levity. My responsibility is confined to this book; and I have carefully avoided touching upon even the recent years of my subject's life, so crowded with misfortunes and his refusals to be outraged by them that I certainly could not give plausibility to the tale.

ii

I may have conveyed in these earlier pages an impression of Calvinistic faith in predestined happenings. If that is so, let me cancel the impression. It would be

truer, it seems to me, to say that the character of Felix is his fate, as one of the ancients (or one of the moderns) has in general terms declared. Felix might as well have lived a humdrum life and ended in penurious respectability. He has not done so. He is neither impecunious nor respectable. Nobody respects him. He is a sybarite and an egotist; and he has never earned the rewards of egotism, which lie in the envy and the submission of others. I cling to my first statement, that there must be something in his character which naturally produces disaster. There must be something in the grinning welcome which he gives to misfortune. She drops in to tea with Felix whenever she has been having a thin time elsewhere.

And yet he complains, as we have seen, of his unfortunateness. It is one of his vanities. Most likely he prides himself upon his power to endure. After all, there is not one among us who is not secretly complacent over his defects, and if there is anything of that kind going on we may be sure that Felix will be holding a banner of some sort. He will, I think, be gratified rather than offended in the present instance by disclosure of the facts, for his vanity is insatiable. He said to me, recently:

"You know, Swinnerton, I'd have given anything to be one of those people who are an anxiety to their families. It must be delightful."

"They're not as a rule happy people," I objected, thinking of some that I know and the coil of trouble they have produced.

"No; but think of their self-importance. It must make them feel regal, or even criminal. They've got enormous power over the herd. They represent romance—something unstable, uncontrollable—they can't be ignored or forgotten. Chatter, chatter, chatter about them . . . and never an end until they're dead. They're like babies staggering into the traffic. Nobody has such a gloriously

free life as the man who's an anxiety to his family. He draws the last drop of affection out of his relatives—and when affection's ended there is always duty and family vanity. There's always fear of what neighbours may think, and ultimately of the coroner's rebuke. If he's good for a time, there's none so good. It's marvellously virtuous of him to go sober to bed one night in seven, to bring home a saveloy for supper when he knows there are fifty saveloys in the house already. . . . And they're all frightened to cross him for fear of the consequences—to *himself*, mind you. They think that if somebody told him he was a waster and a sot and an incubus he might do something desperate. He must fall soft every time, and the mat must have 'Welcome' on it. Oh, I tell you, he has a great time. . . . Besides, he's salutary. He keys up the family's guts. He is the cause that unselfishness is in other men. Now why wasn't I born one of these missionaries to mankind?"

Felix sank into a reverie, crossing his hands fastidiously upon his stomach, his chin upon his broad chest; and I noticed the flesh beneath the chin spreading over his collar.

iii

The house in which the Hunters lived belonged nominally to Grumps, and Grumps was Mrs. Hunter's father. Mr. Hunter's father, although in London, lived a long way away, and was known as "the Old Chap at Farley Street." But the Hunters lived with Grumps in this house at High Field on the north side of London. The suburb has since become an ignoble detail in that expanding eyesore of bricks and slates which is the London of the permanently poor; but at the time I am describing it was newly arisen, and for miles around there were fields and orchards and quiet lanes, as of the country.

The house itself was a small one, and nowadays would be considered mean, although it never was as mean as the low-ceilinged collections of air-tight cupboards which are built and let now at famine prices. It lay, however, in the middle of a grassy space, with a long path from the roadway to the front door which stood between two bay windows. Before the door was the chief glory of the house—a marble doorstep which gleamed like the top of a washstand and was commented upon with admiration by friendly callers. Within doors was first to be seen a long flight of stairs—the same down which Felix tumbled and upon which he was in the habit of sitting at ease. Rooms to the right and left held green carpets and green-covered mahogany furniture with old-fashioned braid hiding the seams. In the kitchen the family took all its meals, and this was a bright and warm square room with a brick floor and some scraps of carpet and a birdcage in which a canary sang with Hunterian gaiety. And there was a little black cat called Tippetty-Witchet, which loved Felix and which was loved by Felix in return.

When I say that the house was “nominally” owned by Grumps I must explain the meaning of the term. It cannot be done without an account of Grumps, who was a slight, large-nosed, bright-eyed, bearded man of about sixty, with a strong Edinburgh accent and a graceful, rather winning manner, who sang a great deal and had an extraordinary facetious and ridiculous humour combined with a sudden pugnacious ferocity which immediately betrayed the country of his birth. Once, in getting into an omnibus, Grumps stumbled against a man who carried his arm in a sling. The man ignored Grumps’s apology: it was repeated. “I beg your pardon,” said Grumps, who as usual was very conciliatory.—“So you ought to,” grumbled the man, carefully feeling his arm.—“I’m sorry I hurrt ye,” said Grumps. He observed the

man gently but keenly, and noticed his yellow eyes and dusty hair and savage expression.—“Look where you’re going,” he was told, very sulkily. Grumps remained extremely calm. “You’ve hurrt your arm,” he persisted sympathetically, indicating the sling.—“Can’t you see?” growled the man. “Are you blind?”—“Broken it?”—“Yes, I *have* broken it,” cried the man, wriggling with exasperation at the colloquy. With the same sympathy, the same coolness and fortitude of manner, Grumps replied: “I’m sorry ye have broken your arm;” and then, with an indescribable thickening of his voice, so that it conveyed passionate hatred: “I’m thinking what a pity it is it wasn’t your *neck*. . . .”

Grumps was a Scotsman with remarkable talent in his delicate fingers—he was not an artist, but a craftsman—for engraving upon steel and copper with strange sharp tools the official certificates and decorative pronouncements which are now more simply rendered by the printing press and the process block. He was a Scotsman who could evoke his own tears by the singing of such ancient Scottish ballads as the “Banks of Loch Lomond” and “Annie Laurie” and “Robin Adair” in a very sweet tenor voice; and he had at one time been the principal tenor in a cathedral choir. He had also that readily emotional generosity which made him the prey of many peculiar and shifty men of every stamp. Some of them were revolutionary politicians exiled from their own lands, some were quacks and mock-inventors, some were book-makers, some—possibly all—were thieves. To each one Grumps gave his enthusiasm, his ingenious, loquacious, long-tongued anecdotal gift. With each he drank the liquor of his native land.

By his beautiful craftsmanship in a decaying trade, Grumps had prospered. He had made money. He had bought this house with his savings, had furnished it

amply, had put money by. He had ceased, as the result of a hot-tempered quarrel, to be manager of the engraving department of a large general printing firm, and had himself become an employer. Days of happiness and plenty were at that time long and impressive. They extended beautifully, until the normal vista stretching before the McNaughtans was a dream of content. And then Grumps had done the thing which men otherwise seemed only to do in books by such wild, flamboyant, impromptu writers as Charles Reade—he had backed the bills of a friend for thousands of pounds. And the friend had dishonoured his bills and decamped. He was lost to view. And with that friend at one cast went the fortune of Grumps and the fortune of the McNaughtans and the Hunters. Not at first was this seen, however staggering the blow; but it proved to be so. Saddled with a debt that was his only by the folly of generosity, Grumps had acknowledged his responsibility; and as one detail in the necessary provision for its payment he had mortgaged for its full value the house with the marble doorstep and the ample furniture. It was in this way that he became merely the nominal owner of that house. The disaster occurred, I must add, in fairness to my hero, three years before Felix was born.

There followed with swiftness the further decline of an already declining trade, hastened by the rapid advance of all sorts of new methods of mechanical reproduction, hastened also by the fact that Grumps's fibre was weakened by years of excessive drinking. Stimulant in order that he might work, stimulant in order that he might yet be the gay companion of his colleagues, stimulant in order that he might keep up his courage; and so grew Grumps's commitments, and so grew his inability to deal with them. Added to this, Malcolm Hunter, the father of Godfrey and Felix, was not of the same calibre as Grumps. He was a weaker man who in affluence might have been noble

and learned, but who in poverty, although he preserved an air of confidence, was in secret appalled by unforeseen difficulties, and unable, even with his wife's help—she having much of the astonishing nervous vitality of Grumps,—to dominate circumstance. He was even paralysed by it. He could do nothing but work when there was work to do, and seek work when there was none to be had. And he too was the prey of men less scrupulous, until they found through his natural candour that they had nothing to gain from his exploited yieldingness.

And with these troubles and others growing every month more acute, Grumps gradually lost all power of dealing with any of them. From being an employer and a man of flashing eye and eager generosity, he became slowly a parasite upon the energy of the junior members of his family. He drank deep, not merely of sorrow, but of those liquors which steal away the hearts and brains and nerves of men; from strength and activity he fell into a state of groaning valetudinarian dependence; instead of the leader of all effort, he was an anxiety the more for those who remained staunch. Thus, with the days of plenty and of contentment gone abruptly from them, the Hunters sank to endurance and unspontaneous thrift. Their days of prosperity were over. Then did shadows come to the door and upon the hearts of them all; then did Felix learn for the first time the need of discretion even in the matter of answering or not answering the loudest knocks. He had been born into a contrary world. It was his first misfortune—the key disaster, as it were, of his whole life.

iv

When Felix had been put to bed and had fallen fast asleep in perfect happiness—for he remained the good

and cheery baby he had been from the time of his first shout and first life-giving sleep—Ma and Auntie Lallums had a slight inspection of the kitchen cupboard. Auntie Lallums looked first, and summoned Ma; and Godfrey pushed in front of them to look also. The laughter was general, for the cupboard was bare. Excepting for potatoes, and perhaps a turnip or so, all in the house that was edible lay there under the eyes of Ma and Auntie Lallums. It was very little. Yet two hungry men would presently come home, dispirited and exhausted, from their day in search of work; and a meal must somehow be prepared for them. Something from nothing—it was to be Mrs. Hunter's daily act of magic for the next dozen years.

Ma at this time was a small, very slim, but strongly built young woman of thirty-two. She was dark, but not very dark; and her beauty lay in an exquisite complexion, resembling the tints of the most tender rose. Her brow was fine and open, her mouth agreeably modelled, her eyes clear, and her whole expression one of gentleness and intelligence. She had unmistakably the Scots cast of face, with high cheekbones and arched nose, a fresh, unaffectedly tender voice which held youth until she was quite old, and a quick readiness to help with her brain or her hands which was instinctive in her family.

She had received a very good education for that period, spoke French perfectly, and was a brilliant pianist. She had always had considerable gifts as an artist, and if she had not anticipated Felix in a preference for misfortune she might have been a painter. Unfortunately circumstances had pressed her into Grumps's trade for a time, and beyond being given an opportunity thereafter for some designing of jam-labels and little fandangles in water-colour she had been deprived of full scope for her gifts. And, at the age of twenty-four, she had married.

On the morning of her wedding day, now eight years

past, Ma had awakened in a bride's panic, demanding "What am I getting married for? I don't *want* to get married!" It was a terrible moment of anguish, as if by clairvoyance she had known the passing of her youth and the horrors of the future; but being a woman of nerve (certainly not of convention) she kept her word and was married. Never once, through years of almost insupportable struggle with poverty, did Ma utter any complaint of her lot. She was a good daughter, wife, mother, working endlessly until she could work no longer, and enduring when hope itself seemed a malicious sporting with fate. If she had a fault it was that she thought too little of herself, that her sympathy with others outran discretion; and this was a weakness which remained with her throughout life. She would give and give, and others would take and take. She neither learned herself how to take nor taught her two sons that invaluable lesson. As a result, both Felix and Godfrey retained perpetually a politeness and gentleness of demeanour that was sometimes mistaken by rougher men and women for submissiveness. However wounded, hard pressed, exhausted, Ma thought nothing of herself. She was fundamentally and criminally indifferent to herself, as Felix is. There was no self-love in her composition. She was so truly imaginative, and at the same time so scornfully proud, that she would at all times waive a right, rather than insist upon it.

Stoical, in this way, to a fault, Ma paid the penalty of her offence. Nevertheless, she was a brave woman, quick and unflinching in doing that which lay nearest to her hand. In this case the need was for competent housewifery. She was faced with the problem of making a dinner for four persons out of the gloomy nothingness contained by the kitchen cupboard. Need I add that the problem was solved?

v

It had been solved, and the auxiliary problem of keeping the meal hot yet unburnt had also been solved, by the time Pa reached home. Godfrey had been put to bed, and the two sisters had come to an end of their ready talk; the clock upon the mantelpiece had begun to tick deafeningly in the night silences; the fixed gaze at nothingness of Tippetty-Witchet had frequently made Auntie Lallums and Ma throw glances of fear over their shoulders. That long day of strain, with the heavy knocking at the front of the house, while they quaked within, had exhausted their nerves. They had even, once, flung open the kitchen door, driven by terror to that plucky and panic act of desperation. The fire had died down, had been economically replenished, had given alarming little flits of sound, and had fallen once more to a greying redness. Tick-atick-atick-atick, said the clock; a leaf whispered against the window; a long silence followed—a silence as of a watch by the dead. They were hushed and expectant. Then at last the sound of a key in the lock of the front door caused both women to leap up with faint exclamations of relief. The paralysis of waiting was at an end. Only Ma knew how urgently she hoped that the newcomer was Pa; how anxiously she paused in her quick movement towards the table in order to give one swift glance at his face. If his grey eyes shone dully, if his smile was fixed and meaningless, she knew that her heart would sink, and the tears of humiliation gather behind her eyes. . . .

It was not so. The tall, already slightly gaunt, figure of Malcolm Hunter entered the kitchen quite steadily. He tiptoed, closing the door softly behind him, and cautiously looking round the room, lest one of the children should be there. His cheeks were still fresh-coloured, and

although his mouth had a slight downward pull of discouragement he had evidently not been drinking that day to make up for failure or to celebrate minute success. He was sober; tired, but cheerful. In an instant all three of them were happy. Pa had a large round face, and wore closely trimmed side-whiskers, which he maintained so as to minimise the contrast between the sizes of his face and his cranium. As a young man he had been extremely hirsute, in the fashion of the day, but he was already partially bald. He grew balder as time went on, but the bald part of his head never became shiny. He had well-opened grey eyes beneath full eyebrows, a long straight nose, apparently very broad shoulders. But his build was deceptive. Beside a really tall man he was dwarfed. I think his legs may have been a little short for his body. In any case his true breadth was not as great as it seemed, for his shoulder-muscles were under-developed. In youth, as one of a large family the members of which were all of better physique than himself, he had been described always by his sisters as "our handsome brother, Malcolm," and he was still good-looking. His bearing, however, was without grace, and there was a lack of delicacy in his hands, which were hairy, and especially in his strong fingers. He drank tea with his meal, and poured his tea from the cup to the saucer before drinking it. There was a long period of eating and drinking, during which very few words were spoken. Presently Malcolm set down his cup and saucer, and pushed away his plate.

"Where's Grumps?" he asked; and at their shaken heads he shrugged his shoulders. "I got one or two jobs and went back to the office in the afternoon to do them—a bill-head and some visiting cards;—but he didn't turn up there. I suppose he met somebody. . . . I stayed late to finish."

"Did Pelch come in?" asked Ma. Pelch was a man who proposed to make a fortune by manufacturing a new species of adhesive paste, and who was to use the office of Grumps and Pa (a single room in a City building given up to such offices) as his headquarters. Ma's interest was in Pelch's payment of rent, and not at all in his furtive personality. The memory of decayed teeth and a slow grin of evil understanding made her even at this moment aware of a slight shiver which raised her shoulders. Pa shook his head.

"I think he's a rascal," he remarked. Ma and Auntie Lallums exchanged glances. They did not mention that this idea had long ago originated with themselves. Pa resumed: "Little John came in. He wanted to borrow." Again that exchanged glance. Pa looked up suddenly, and caught it. A frown appeared on his face, for Pa was sensitive, and like most sensitive people resented most a criticism which he felt to be justified. "He didn't get anything," he cried sharply. "And as a matter of fact it may lead to a job . . . to a lot of work."

They placated him with nods. It was important that he should be pleased with them. They were women, and that was a day before the one upon which women first came assertively into the open as censors of their male breadwinners.

"Good!" they said. Pa was appeased. He took out his pipe and moved away from the table. He wore a dark grey coat with tails, which he spanked in order to hear whether he had any matches in the pocket. Ma and Auntie Lallums, aware that it was nearly eleven o'clock, gathered together the used dishes and carried them away for washing up. They listened for any noise at the front door or from the sleeping children in the bedrooms upstairs. All was silent.

When they returned to the kitchen they found Pa

meditatively smoking. He was reading a book—one of his favourites,—for Pa was a good reader and a lover of books. The two women moved across the kitchen, and as her sister went out of the room Ma paused. Her tone was lowered, as if she were already passing the children on her way to bed.

“Leave the gas a little on,” she said, “for Grumps. His supper’s in the pot. Don’t stop up too late.”

Pa looked carefully round, to make sure that the smiling Lilian was gone, and then put his arm round Ma, patting her in his not very demonstrative clumsy way, as if she had been a pony.

“All right, Ma?” he asked. “Boys all right?”

A nod. He kissed her—still gauche, although he loved her and in some degree appreciated her devotion. They were at peace for an instant, vaguely intimate and understanding. Then he drew half-a-sovereign from his pocket and put it into her hand. Both stared at the half-sovereign, which looked unreal in its smallness and fine glow. Perhaps also in its comparative unfamiliarity.

“The men came today,” Ma said. “We didn’t answer, and they went away. Felix said ‘Hush,’ and sat on the stairs.” She held up her finger as Felix had done.

“Rates?”

“They’ll be cutting off the water.”

“I’ll have enough by Saturday. Where’s that damned old man, Grumps? What’s he doing, I wonder?”

vi

Presently Pa, too, felt that the day had been long enough, and knocked the ashes out of his pipe and put his book down. He had been reading one of those thin essays by Froude which that friend of one of Pa’s idols had collected under the title of “Short Studies on Great Sub-

jects." Still with his mind bent upon the days of Henry the Eighth, of Erasmus and Warham and Luther—happy release from thoughts of half-crowns and copper plates and burnishers and Pelch's Paste and the ugly sweating painted walls of his office,—Pa lowered the gas until it became the merest peep. He had taken off his boots, and now, in those curious, cheap, sand-and-tomato-coloured socks which are no longer worn by anybody, he went slowly up the stairs to bed. As he passed the open door of the room where Godfrey slept, he looked in, but could see nothing. Godfrey was sleeping quietly, his thin little dark face sunk deep in the pillow, and his long straight black hair falling over his eyes. Pa did not stay, but went into the neighbouring room, where the gas was burning yet. His glance at Felix, sleeping in a cot near the bed in which Ma already lay, was different. There was thus early a profound difference in his attitude towards the two boys, which increased in after years. It arose from the fact that Godfrey resembled himself in character, although the little boy, dark in a foreign manner, was like a brilliant stranger in that family; and the two personalities, so alike, both so sensitive and so easily wounded and so resentful of wounds, could not fail to clash. Pa stopped, looking at the agreeable Felix smiling in his sleep, his hands both up under his chin, the little fingers bunched, very white and delicate. For a moment or two Pa even sat down beside his younger son's cot, looking at the copper hair and the long lashes and in particular at that smiling little mouth. With an air of shyness, as though he were rather ashamed of his wish to kiss the baby, which he did not indulge, he put a forefinger to Felix's cheek, turned away, and began to undress.

Once in bed, Pa thought continuously of Felix, and had that father's dream of a perfect understanding with his son, of the boy coming to him all his life, straight

and with clear eyes, for advice, for friendship. . . . He thought of his pride in Felix, and the respect which Felix would continue to show even when he grew up and became a great man and had children of his own. . . . Poor fool, he should already have learned from the failure of his relation with Godfrey that it was to their mother the boys would always go. . . . He did not know, did not foresee. There is always some impassable obtuseness in our self-esteem, our estimate of the assured dividends of love. His mind, as sleep began to soften his thoughts and render them inchoate, was still busy with this delusive hope . . . understanding, trust, always the *friend* of his boy . . . delightful task, to rear the infant mind and teach . . . the young idea . . . how to . . .

A long time passed. Everybody in the house was deep in slumber. In the outer darkness the stirring wind rose and became blustrous. At the shiver of heavy raindrops against the bedroom window the gale seemed abruptly to diminish; but the shower passed, and again the wind moaned and grew vehement. Ma's eyes opened, to close again immediately. She slept very peacefully, as Felix did, lying so still as to appear almost lifeless. Left to itself the house began, as it were, to stretch its limbs, and at intervals occurred the crackings and little whisperings of solitude.

And then, out of this night peace, came suddenly an amazing thunder at the front door below. A long rat-tat-tat, at first hardly noticeable, swelled to uproar. It was frightening. Pa, not yet awakened, moved. His arm was clutched.

"Eh . . . eh . . . eh?" he stammered, uncomprehending the reason of his broken sleep.

"Knock," whispered Ma. "Oh, for goodness sake stop it!"

Her explanation was for Pa, but her ejaculation was

addressed wildly to the unknown cause of disturbance. Already she was half-concentrating upon the cot, in case Felix should have been awakened. And as she spoke there came another unrepentant banging at the front door. Pa leapt from bed, running to the window. He threw it open. Confused suppositions filled his mind. Fire? The police? A madman? A bailiff's ruse? He was swearing under his breath. From the window he could see down into the garden, where in the pale moonlight the black bushes threw blacker shadows, mysterious and rain-bespangled. Craning, until the ground nearest the house was visible, he was able at last to distinguish a figure.

"Is that you, Mahlcolm?"

Grumps stood below, a slim figure in a long ulster, the cape of which reached his waist, while the skirt of the coat came nearly to his heels. This ulster was in daylight a reddish brown, cut into small squares by thick black lines; but in the moonlight it became jet. An old top-hat was upon Grumps's head, and at his first glance Malcolm could see that at some time during the day it had found a resting-place in mud. There was something flamboyant in Grumps's attitude, reminding Pa of D'Artagnan. It was not yet the day of Cyrano de Bergerac in Rostand's travesty. Grumps raised his hand, flinging back the cape of his ulster with a regal gesture.

"Hush! What on earth . . ." murmured Pa.

"What is it?" Ma was at his side, also craning her neck. A giggle, half of amusement at the bizarre figure beneath the window, half of apprehensive indignation, shook her. "The cheek of him!" she exclaimed, and then: "Where's your key?" she demanded, in a whisper that carried antagonism to the ears of that ego-saturated being in the garden. With a curl of the lip which was invisible to those above, her father ignored the question. His grandeur was unaffected.

"Come down, mahn!" cried Grumps, very Scottish in tone and peremptoriness. "Come down, I say. I've come home!"

"Where's your key?"

"You may ask the gutters of London that question!" cried Grumps, hissing. "And the unmade roads and morasses of this accursed land. Was ever such a question! Come down and get these things! At once. I'm wet. . . . D'ye not *grrasp* that?"

And with this bitter reproach, to their consternation, Grumps turned and trotted off down the road at a sort of grave canter, holding his head back, and extending his arm as if for the purpose of balancing his person better in this strange, this incredible flight.

vii

Grumps had had an unusual day, even as days went in Grumps's eventful life. Many of these were peculiar—or would have been considered so by another person. He sometimes as a younger man came home with bruised knuckles, and uttered a quelling cry of "Auch, it does not matter" when the fact was discovered and an explanation sought; and at last, urged thereto by his anxious daughters, he had gone about with those ugly protective weapons called knuckle-dusters—a set of steel rings fitting the fingers, with raised sharpnesses pointing outwards when the fists were clenched. His encounters with roughs were many, and he had been known to catch the foot of a man who was kicking him and so to twist it in throwing off his assailant that the fight came immediately to an end. But in general Grumps was a peaceable man, and went his own way quietly. Upon the morning of this day he had gone early to London with Pa, and from Farringdon Street station, where they both left the train,

had walked towards the City. His calls for some time had been fruitless, and, rather disconsolately, feeling mean and poor and old, he had eaten his daily sandwiches in the bar of an obscure public house. He had then found a small and very urgent piece of engraving to do at the office of a firm which had its own engraving staff, none of whose members, however, had at command the famous delicacy of Grumps's work. He was therefore welcomed, had tools lent to him, and was seated then and there before somebody else's bench and sandbag, with gravers and oiled-rubbers and burnishers ready to his hand. Work was delayed by a trifling scene with the owner of the tools, whom Grumps rebuked for their condition with the ire of a scrupulous worker, and he then sharpened some of the neglected gravers and wiped them free from oil and the filth that attends perspiration.

The job had been done; Grumps had drunk a mug of tea with the manager of the engraving department; and at five o'clock, with seven-and-sixpence in his pocket, he was sucking the last drops of tea off his moustache, when another urgent job came in. By now, Grumps was in the mood to work all night; and little heeding the not very cordial expression of the man whose tools he had usurped and put into first-class order, he cried "Give it me!" and took his coat off again. This job took him until eight o'clock, and he was even better pleased with the contents of his pocket. He was so pleased, in fact, that he invited the manager to join him in a small meal. A drink was not declined, and when the manager—who was a God-fearing man much dependent upon his wife's good-will—had gone home, Grumps—less circumscribed in action—continued to sit in the saloon bar of this public-house, filling his glass from time to time and talking very generally with any men who came into the bar.

He had been there for almost an hour when a portly

fellow entered and asked for a glass of sherry; and as the man, after a glance round, stood with his back to Grumps, Grumps felt it proper to take some offence. His mind began to work round and round the fact that this man had turned his back, and he sprang to the conclusion that the action had been deliberate. It had been nothing of the kind, of course; but Grumps was not a man to stickle for accuracy in a case of this sort. He was sure that the slight had been premeditated; that the man had come into the public-house on purpose to pick a quarrel with him. He brooded upon the unmannerliness of the stranger—then upon his outrageous insultingness—upon the habit of such men as this to affront those who were in every way superior to themselves—and finally it was as though Grumps had been struck a heavy blow by the stranger.

"Before God," said he, with something of his old fire, "I will not stand it!"

And with that he rose, and went towards the unconscious stranger, who was weighing up in his mind the comparative wisdom or unwisdom of drinking another glass of sherry. Tapping him upon the arm, Grumps said in a very measured voice:

"Excuse me. Ex-cuse me, but I believe you turned your back upon me, sir."

With that, the stranger looked full in the face of Grumps.

"Why, Watty!" he cried, in unmistakable Doric.

Grumps looked at the portly man, at a pair of enormously shrewd eyes above a hooked nose, at two rather white cheeks and a long thin mouth; and his anger dropped away like water.

"Ahlan!" responded he. They stood shaking hands with unflinching grip, clapping each other upon the shoulders and even pinching those shoulders in their common delight. "Eh, eh!" exclaimed Grumps, in the highest

glee. "Splendid! Splendid! And hoo's Aidenbro? Well! I say, you must drink a sup wi' me. Auld Ahlan! 'The like o' that, now!" Again they shook hands and clapped shoulders.

And then it appeared that Alan lived quite near; and that if Grumps would come with him they would have some dinner and a long crack, not to mention an unlimited allowance of the exquisite brew of their native land. No sooner was the suggestion made than it was seen by both to be ideal. Together the two men, who had not seen each other for twenty years, left the public-house and made their way through the neighbouring streets to a square in which private houses still stood, very irreproachable as to curtains and brass, with fine Georgian fronts and tall slim protective railings before them. A warmth of pleasure seized Grumps. His natural emotionalism was roused. Tears stood in his eyes, and when he and his friend laughed at the table the tears ran out upon Grumps's cheeks, and sounded in his irresistibly antic laughter. More and more cheerful and convivial and sentimental did the two men become, laughing uproariously, repeating old hints and gibes, recalling forgotten ridiculous experiences—until in their extremity of carousal they would have given each other at need the coats off their backs; until Grumps would have been very content to curl up in an armchair with a rug about him and sleep the remainder of the night away in his friend's cosy home.

Something, however, caused Alan to take Grumps through the house, and especially through the kitchen, in order to show him a big old-fashioned dresser and an enormous fireplace before which one could roast the largest joints of the ox. In their frolic the two men threw open the door of the larder, where Alan was amused to see hanging the carcase of a huge goose. Sportively,

he lifted this goose down from its hook, and pressed it into Grumps's arms. "There you are!" he cried. "As frien' to frien'." They both laughed so much that Grumps sat on the floor, still holding the goose in his arms, and this posture—seen by the one and endured by the other—increased their merriment. For some moments both were helpless with laughter, and then the portly Alan, his fancy caught by this extremely preposterous situation, took other edibles from the larder and pressed them upon his friend. "There!" he exclaimed. "Take *that* hame to the bairns; and *that!*" . . .

So it came about that, by the help of a hansom-cab, Grumps, heavily laden with the goose and other food-stuffs, and with banknotes for twenty pounds in his wallet, was enabled to catch the last train for High Field. He staggered a little as he ran for the train, and he saw as he arrived upon the platform that it was already moving. There was no time for delay. He pushed open the door of the guard's compartment, threw upon its floor the goose, scrambled in, dropping his top-hat as he did so, and stood panting and exclaiming with relief. He wiped his brow with his handkerchief, and ejaculated. His mind went swiftly back to his friend, their parting, their festivity. . . . And then he thought he would have a crack with the guard. The train, by this time, having slipped back a yard or two, as it was always liable to do upon the incline, had begun to move uphill and homeward. Loud cascading of laborious noise came from its engine. Grumps looked round for the guard. There was no guard. He was alone in the compartment. In his present mood of incandescent lucidity, Grumps's brain moved like lightning. He saw everything with dazzling clearness. This was the guard's van; no guard was here; therefore, it was evident, by some calamitous accident the

guard had been left behind. A calamity, yes; but one that could be averted. Averted by Grumps!

With Grumps the distance between thought and action was negligible. At a bound, ignoring his own baggage—flinging it away from him,—he sprang to the guard's brake. A quick, strong turn, an exertion of greater strength, a terrible rattling and banging. . . . Grumps wiped his brow again. The train, staggering uphill, slowed down; after a fierce, thunderous expulsion of steam it was at last brought to a stop. A distant shouting, confused, angry, reached Grumps's ears; and the squeaking of compartment windows as excited passengers sought to understand what had happened. He leaned complacently from the door of the guard's van, and the ridiculousness of the situation was suddenly presented to him with astounding force. Here was a queer picture! Himself, parting with difficulty from his host, climbing into a hansom-cab, rushing through the streets at a gallop, catching the train by the barest chance, and saving the unfortunate guard, presumably, from a fate which at the best would have involved a night in the dingy waiting-room. At the worst—and here Grumps became serious again—it might have meant loss of work, pension. . . . A sigh at the perception of the tragic lot of man, of the blind cruelty of industrial organizations towards their employés, shook him. A tear started to his eye. However, that was all avoided now. He had saved the situation. . . .

Still, as he looked out into the blackness, broken by a swinging spot of light, came those shouts of anger. When they knew the cause of the stoppage these men would cease to be angry. They would be full of concern. The guard's dismay would be turned to rejoicing. He would overtake the train. There would be hearty hand-shaking, beaming faces of gratitude and laughter at the

contretemps. Grumps promised himself the rich treat of describing to the guard the amusing succession of events. He was already bubbling with the comic sense of it all, his laughter coming in breathless jerks.

The bawling came nearer. There was a distant hail; and then a roaring voice seemed to shoot out of the ground quite near to Grumps. It said: "Some blerry fool's bin an' put the brake on here. . . . *Blast!*"

viii

It took some time to arrange matters with the guard, who had been travelling, as he proposed to continue doing, in the forward van next the engine; and Grumps was slightly ruffled by the man's rudeness. But when the nature of his unwisdom had been made clear he was very penitent. He pressed upon the guard some small change from his trouser pocket, and was at length forgiven. He was allowed to continue his journey in the van, surrounded by his freshly acquired larder. All the other passengers by the train had joined in the shouting, and ten minutes had been lost. But now the other windows were drawn up again and the train proceeded. Grumps remained where he was, crestfallen but unshaken. As he said to himself: "If the guard *had* happened to be left behind" He recovered most of his new belongings, rather dusty, but intact. They made a brave array. They seemed almost to have increased in number, but although an obscure jest about propinquity and population flitted across the old man's mind it was quickly forgotten.

The train panted on from station to station, pulling up with much heavy creaking, and starting again with sudden jerks which made Grumps cling to the door of the guard's van. At each station he prepared to descend, only to find that he had not yet reached High Field; and

the disagreeableness of this repeated disappointment was such that, coupled with the late hour and the extraordinary libations of the evening, it caused Grumps very nearly to miss the right station when it arrived. He clambered out of the train in time, however, and groped about on the inky platform for all his packages, several of which had fallen in the scramble. In his hand he held a bottle of whisky; under his arm the unwieldy goose; minor articles were scattered about him. The rain had been falling, and everything was dripping and glistening about him. As he stooped, Grumps felt his hat, a very high, old-fashioned "topper," lurch from his head; and he saw it skipping away into the darkness. In the hurried pursuit he felt something else go. By this time the sudden flaring exasperation of the highly strung person had seized him, and when the goose caused him almost to overbalance he threw it upon the ground and kicked it in fury. But at last he was passably in possession of his baggage, and struggled out of the station, the lights of which were by this time extinguished. Owing to the delay, Grumps found himself quite alone in the station yard, amid showers of heavy rain, with a hill of nearly half a mile in length to climb. He felt very tired. If the weather had been fine he might have been persuaded to sit amid his spoils, with his back to the fence, and to fall asleep. The rain, however, prohibited this indulgence; and Grumps had to consider seriously a difficult problem. Not a single human being was near. He was alone in the blackness and the occasionally shimmering moonlight. And his problem was: how to effect the transport of his own exhausted and infirm person, plus the carcase of the goose, the bottle of whisky, and perhaps a dozen minor parcels and boxes, from this spot to the house with the marble doorstep.

His decision was rapid. Seizing the goose and the

bottle, he ran a little way forward, and when he was breathless walked on for perhaps fifty yards. Then, depositing his load, and resting, he presently went back and brought all the other things to the point at which he had left his first cargo. This done, he repeated the performance, laboriously making the journey by slow degrees. All this was not carried out with perfect smoothness; for Grumps had a touch of the pedant in him, and he quickly became aware that a highly prized jar of pickled onion had somehow been left behind during one of his treks. The search for it, the stumbling, the repeated loss of his hat while he was in the act of stooping and loading himself, moved him to a state of fury and perspiration extremely disgusting. He was himself aware of disgust. He was in many matters so fastidious that he disliked himself violently for his own heat in frenzy. But at the same time Scottish tenacity, and a sort of Scottish fiddling precision, forced him into something very like ritual in the arrangement and carriage of his parcels. He felt that he must carry them in a certain way, a certain unvarying order. . . .

Every time Grumps left the whisky behind him he felt a pang of dread lest some lurking thief should capture it. Several times he forced himself to carry the bottle with a load to which it did not belong, but as this involved a heavy return journey he finally decided that it must be hidden at each stage. This gave further trouble, owing to his preoccupation and forgetfulness, which made him search quite frantically, probing in muddy corners with his bruised fingers until upon one occasion he was driven to dreadful blasphemy, with his arms stretched high and his weary eyes fixed challengingly upon the impassive moon.

The painful journey was at length completed. He reached the house, failed to find his key, which was in

its usual place in his left-hand trouser pocket, and caused the loud noises which have been described. When he was seen running back along the road, Grumps was hastening to retrieve his final batch of treasure; and by the time the adults were downstairs, hastily wrapped in dressing-gowns or overcoats, shivering with excitement, he had returned in maniacal triumph.

ix

The scene in the kitchen, when the light was fully turned on, was grotesque. Ma and Auntie Lallums both had dressing-gowns, but Pa wore his shabby old overcoat, and his bare ankles showed beneath it. Grumps retained his ulster and his tall hat. The goose and the parcels lay muddily upon the table. And as they gazed at each other, and Grumps, with one final spasm of energy, removed the outer covering of the whisky bottle, the group was increased by the arrival of Godfrey, dressed only in his nightshirt.

"Oh, my duckie! You *shouldn't!*" cried Ma, clutching him to her and covering him with her dressing-gown.

"Go back to bed!" said Pa, very savagely.

Grumps extended a mild, deprecating hand, not very precisely directed, towards Godfrey's head.

"No, no," said Grumps in a gentle, dignified voice. "Well, Godfrey, my boy. How arre ye? Top o' the class, eh? Look what Grumps has brought for ye!" He waved a generous arm rather vaguely and boastfully towards the muddy parcels.

"What?" asked Godfrey, curiously, earnestly. He was hushed by his mother. "Well, I want to see what he's brought . . ."

"Take off your coat and boots, Grumps. You're soaked. You'll catch cold."

"Auch, it does not matter!" said Grumps, impatiently. And then he gave a fierce cry of rage at the resisting cork.

"Grumps! Grumps!"

"Get away to bed, boy!" exclaimed Grumps, looking ferociously at Godfrey. "You ought to be in bed and fast asleep!"

"You woke me up!" protested Godfrey, his chin forward but his lips tremulous.

Pa took the whisky from Grumps; Lallums removed his hat, despite a clutching effort on his part to retain it; and in a trice he was sitting in a chair, his overcoat off, and his boots in process of being unlaced.

"Away!" said Grumps to Godfrey.

"Take him up to bed again, Lily," suggested Ma. "He'll be better in bed."

Grumps let his head sink wearily upon his hand. All the nervous energy which he had used for the purpose of reaching home had been shed. A quick wave of physical collapse and self-pity was upon him.

"Ahm a poor auld man!" he began to murmur, sighing. "A poor auld man. All my life—" he gazed round with melancholy, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand—"all my life I've been a poor auld man . . ."

"Oh, not all your life, Grumps," objected Lallums, practically.

"I *have!*" shouted Grumps, vehemently. Then, as vehemently, like a man reciting a battle-piece: "No, I haven't. I'm not . . . The man that says Watty MacNochtan's an auld man . . . He *lies!*"

"Sh, sh, sh!" whispered Ma, warningly. "Felix!"

But it was too late. The noise had been too violent and too continuous to escape the notice of the one member of the household left sleeping upstairs. Already he was in action above.

"Bless his heart!" cried Auntie Lallums, beginning to laugh.

Felix, like Ancient Freedom, was sitting on the heights, and fragments of his mighty voice came rolling on the wind. He had a powerful voice, and they could hear him shouting at the top of it. In the awed silence which followed the first call they could plainly catch his poignant demand.

"Meat an' tatoes!" bellowed Felix from his cot. "Meat an' tatoes! Meat an' tatoes!"

CHAPTER II: TWO YEARS LATER

i

FELIX at the age of four years was teaching himself to read. He showed a devilish ingenuity of method; but he was never boring to his mother, even when his demands upon her attention were closest. To her there was always something ridiculously charming about him. I notice many young mothers nowadays who are bored by their children, and I expect there were many also in those days who were bored; but Ma was never one of the number. Nor did she spoil her two boys by indulgence. When Felix brought her a book, and asked what the indicated word was, or when he said, unexpectedly: "What's for 'cat,' Ma?" or spelled out "h-o-r-s-e" to learn what word the letters formed, she always told him willingly, and generally added some information such as he could assimilate. Lucky Felix, to have such a mother! She trained his imagination by making him remember dogs and horses, and men and women, that he had seen.

He did not care to have books read aloud to him. He wanted to read them himself. He has always wanted to read things, and especially to do things, for himself. The preference has its social disadvantages. Nor did Felix much like to have stories told to him by the inventor of these stories. It was too great a strain for his nerves. His mind ran on in advance of the narrative, and imagined disasters. This foreboding on behalf of others was what later experience of personal misfortune might have taught him to expect. It was an example of real

prescience. I surmise that he was thus early what might be called a disaster-diviner. The most plausibly agreeable tales were related by his Gran'ma, and he would listen to them sitting upon a little hassock beside her, his hand sometimes upon her knee. At first he was all attention, his brown eyes credulous and welcoming. He would follow the story, absorbed. He would very rarely interrupt—and then only as a Judge will at times interpose a question in order to clear an obscurity. Often he would laugh—and he had a little fresh infectious laugh that always rewarded Gran'ma for any inspiration—at something said by a rabbit or a fisherman or a tiny dwarf with a beard so long that he wore it looped over his arm. But when everything was going smoothly, as if the story were almost *too* happy, Felix's quick fears would be aroused. He would stir, would sigh, would gaze into the distance, picturing the idyllic scene, exulting in the vision of happiness and marvel; and at last, in the most coaxing and delicate and apprehensive manner, fixing his eyes straight upon his Gran'ma's, he would breathlessly appeal: "*Don't* let any bears come!"

Having one morning read a considerable variety of new and fascinating words, and being alone in the house with Ma, Felix proceeded to a number of other activities. He put his reading matter carefully away, conversed awhile with Tip, whose education he was superintending, and sat thoughtfully upon his hassock, contemplating existence. He next ate from the plate, upon which they were being sliced by his mother, some little raw pieces of potato, of which he was very fond; and then went into the garden to play. He was playing at being a perambulating seller of fish, and shouting his wares all round the garden, calling upon the trees, a small shed, and, thoughtfully, upon one or two more meagre growths, and knocking the air with his clenched fist. Presently he

reached Ma, as she stood in the scullery holding the potatoes in their colander under the cold-water tap. Ma was wearing a large blue pinafore, with minute white spots, and it was easy to observe that the overall of Felix had been cut from the same material. Although Felix had grown, he still had his thick crop of copper-coloured hair and his general plump complacency and rich colouring. You could not look at Felix without receiving that little shock of interest or apprehensiveness which comes from the recognition of personality.

"Nice lovely haggit today, ma'am?" he inquired.

"Not today, thank you," said Ma, with a loving glance. "We've got steak for dinner."

"Oh, well, couldn't you . . . couldn't you . . . *mix* them?"

"It's not usual," replied Ma. "But I'll have a haddock. Have you got a small thick one? Very thick?"

"I think so." Felix searched in his basket.

"You're making rather a noise, Felix," Ma just mentioned, quite gently, in order to suggest the fact and to allow its implications to be reached through reflection. "Must you call out so loud?"

"Well, you see," replied Felix, readily, "I *have* to. It's such a warm day, the people's all asleep; and if they don't wake up they won't have . . . have any dinner."

"How dreadful!" said Ma. "Poor things!"

Felix speculated upon this prospect. His face clouded with sympathy for the hungry. Then it cleared again, and he smiled bravely.

"But I expects they'll wake up," he answered, comfortingly. "I'll call out very loud!" And then, seeing that his mother still looked slightly rueful, and misreading the cause of her regret, he tried to distract her mind from the tragedy of his sleepy customers by the introduction of another topic. And I direct the reader's attention to the

fact that he had thus early created his formula for conversational diversion, which, put very plainly, was and is: "Talk about yourself—and *keep on* talking." "Ma," he stammered. "Ma . . . ha'n't I got a pacacious voice!"

ii

Talking about himself was always Felix's favourite occupation. This did not mean that he thought much upon the subject, for all his best speeches were delivered extempore. Would that he had thought more! It would have saved him a great many personal complications. His present use of the topic certainly did not move his mother from her slight dread of continued noise. Felix played, however, more quietly than before. In the end, coming across several chipped stones in the pathway which showed lovely insides, he lowered himself, as children do, to his heels, and began, squatting thus and breathing hard, to examine the jewels. It was a beautiful and absorbing and long new game for Felix. His quietness did not frighten Ma, who was used to him, and who trusted him; and so he was able to continue undisturbed in his happiness, while she went on with her housework and the preparation of the mid-day meal.

Although she was still alert and fresh-complexioned, Ma began to show signs of the troubled life she had been leading. Her expression was less vivacious, more determined. It was not hard—it was never that; but there was a darkness in her eyes and a greater infrequency of smiling lightness upon her lips which marked the consequences of two years' harassing experience of struggle. More than that, however. She was upon this day for a definite reason worried and ashamed and apprehensive, and her nerves were on edge. She had a headache. She moved without swiftness and without spirit. And as she worked

she showed by her occasional thoughtful pauses that she was trying to think simultaneously of many things. All sorts of things, but none of the most pressing of them, evidently, very cheerful or hope-inspiring. She had her reliefs, of course. It was, for example, time for Godfrey to come home from school, and Ma's eyes went once or twice to the clock, which showed that she was as aware of Godfrey as she was of Felix. They were never really absent from her attention. She was constantly listening.

When at last there came the familiar rattling of the letter-box she was relieved. And as she opened the door for Godfrey—a slim, handsome little boy of nine in a home-made blue serge sailor suit—Ma saw a tall man come through the gate from the roadway. He was an official-looking person, with papers in his hand and a badge in his buttonhole. His moustache, upon which Godfrey's black eyes rested immediately, was stiffly waxed, and of great length. Ma knew the man. She stood there wiping her hands upon the lifted corner of her pinafore, ready to take one of his papers. Even before he spoke, the colour began to rise to her cheeks. She looked in this attitude much smaller than she had done in the kitchen, and bending with love over the explanatory Felix. It was as though she shrank before a humiliation that was never diminished by the frequency with which it was endured.

"Good morning, madam. I've called for the wattah rate!" said the man, with a good deal of swagger.

Ma grew very red indeed.

"I'm sorry I haven't got the money now," she said. "It will be sent on."

There was a pause, a falling glance, an instant's fumbling among the papers, and one of them was pressed into Ma's hand.

"Tha-ank you. Good dey," answered the man, a little

more brusquely. He turned away, and his back seemed to show disapproval and contempt and a sense that his quite cynical anticipation had been exactly fulfilled.

Ma closed the door, the colour receding from her cheeks, while Godfrey, who had attended the colloquy, tossed his hat aside and chanted: "I've called for the wattah rate; wattah! wattah!" He danced along the passage and through the kitchen to join his old and valued friend Felix in the garden; and at the same time he tended an imaginary and very long waxed moustache. But Ma's eyes were downcast. She did not even check Godfrey in his unthinking mimicry, so miserable was she, so filled with shame and weariness of spirit.

iii

When Godfrey came abreast of the straightening Felix, the contrast between the two of them could be seen at a glance. Godfrey was so very dark that he looked like a little Italian. His sailor blouse, with its lighter blue collar with the white stripes, made him look very neat and refined. He made every movement rhythmically, with a strong sense of gesture. Felix, on the other hand, although not fair, was decidedly reddish, and he was even slightly freckled. His expression was heartier, as befits one who is also smaller and fatter. Moreover, his work in the garden had made it impossible for Felix to look very clean. He was rather flushed with exercise, and his lips were parted. He rose as he saw Godfrey running out into the garden; and freely showed his brother the new treasures. Godfrey was quickly as interested as Felix in augmenting the treasure; but presently, when she called them both in to their meal, Ma heard him describing his scripture lesson of the morning to the trotting Felix.

"And the man blamed it all on to the woman," Godfrey was saying, "and said 'She tempted me . . .'"

iv

Felix chattered a good deal during dinner; and they were still eating when Grumps unexpectedly came home. At the sound of his key, Ma jumped in her chair, looked at the clock, and at her plate; and her face paled slightly. Grumps, no less than she, had aged in the two years, was drier, more bleached, less erect. His long grey hair hung over his coat-collar, unkempt, his beard was marked with white, his finger-nails had yellowed, and his clothes showed that his self-respect was diminishing. His ingratiating smile was more of a conscious effort, and in it there might be seen, by an acute person, a tinge of unworthy appeal for pity. He came into the kitchen sniffing at the surviving beauties of their meal, and unperturbed by Ma's glance of desperation. She, poor soul, was already eking out with bread what meat and thickened gravy she had been able to spare for herself.

"Have ye got anything t'eat?" whispered Grumps, mysteriously, and with a kind of sickening pretence that he was a poor old man being very jaunty.

"There's soup, Grumps. And a pudding . . . I didn't expect you so early."

Grumps was characteristically mysterious. As Pa had once remarked, Grumps would be mysterious about a potato. He leaned towards Ma in his most confidential manner.

"There was nothing to do. There is no worrrk in London. Nothing. And I went round *there* . . ."

"There was no need to do that, surely?" asked Ma. breathlessly. "Malcolm saw to that. They're coming tomorrow morning at five."

"There's never any harm in making *sure* . . ." said Grumps, pursing his lips and nodding his head. "I was thinking there'd be something for me to do . . ."

"It's all done," said Ma. "Everything except the beds and the curtains. Sh! Wait a minute. I'll get your soup." She went out of the kitchen, leaving Grumps with the children, and feeling obviously sick at heart. Grumps, true to his convivial wish of ingratiating himself, addressed Godfrey, in a very Scottish, sing-song voice.

"Well, Godfrey," he said. "How arre ye? Top o' the class, eh?"

"No, Grumps," said Godfrey, fearlessly. "There's two boys above me."

"Hey? How's that? Ye should give them a *punch* . . ."

Grumps sparred a little, walking lightly on his toes and swaying his body.

"They're bigger than I am," objected Godfrey, in his clear voice.

"Ah!" said Grumps, nodding with meaning. "It's the big hearrt that tells, Godfrey, my boy. Grumps isn't a big man . . ."

"Not as big as Pa," agreed Godfrey.

"Bigger!" cried Grumps. "Bigger. Bigger in every way." He continued to spar.

And at that moment Felix, who had brought his stones in from the garden, and was now engaged, in Ma's absence, in polishing them, dropped one or two of the stones upon the brick floor of the kitchen. They made a pebbly noise. But the noise that checked Ma in the doorway between the kitchen and the scullery, and held her there transfixed, was the exclamation of Felix as he went in pursuit of the vagrant stones.

"Oh, dash it!" cried Felix.

"*What* was that?" demanded Grumps in an impressive tone of shocked amazement.

Felix looked up, saw his mother standing in the doorway, and gave a little squeal of excited laughter. As quick as lightning, he faced the difficulty in the only possible way.

"Oh, Ma!" he said, as if in horrified protest. "Grumps said 'dash it!' *I* diddie say it!"

v

Pa came home after dark, tired and rather morose. Both the children had been put to bed early, for Ma was now single-handed. Auntie Lallums was training to become a nurse, and Gran'ma was away, staying with her own family up in Scotland, and very ill indeed. Grumps had been singing softly to himself all the evening, getting more and more Scots and more and more emotional as he proceeded, until Ma, ordinarily long-suffering, had been able to bear it no longer.

"Grumps, if you want to sing, I wish you'd go out and do it on the hills," she had said, in a dogged voice of exasperation. "I just can't stand it any longer."

"Indeed!" retorted Grumps, in trembling, indignant satire. "It's a strange idea ye have of the way——"

"Yes, I know. I'm very sorry. Do go out. It'll do you good. I'm not very well."

In silence Grumps had gone out of the kitchen, and his closing of the front door had shaken the house. It was as though she could actually *see* the passionate gesture of his rage; as though she could *feel* his equally passionate hatred at that black moment of herself. Ma, with so much else to cause her to be almost distracted, stood, as she had done at his exit, with a singular smile upon her lips. She might have cried, but she did not. Instead,

with the absurdity of the whole scene more obvious each instant, she was for a moment or two overcome by silent—almost tearful—laughter. If one had said that she had two children to deal with, the calculation of number would have been inexact. She had four, and the two elder ones were more childish than her own boys.

"They're both so . . . dignified!" she exclaimed, still laughing as though her heart would break. And with that she sat down in front of the fire, and was sitting there when Pa came into the house. With him she could deal more easily, for although he was tired and sensitive and sulky he was not such an actor as Grumps. Besides, she knew and followed his moods as only a loving woman can do. There was no thought in her mind of the sympathy and love and encouragement due to herself. It was rarely forthcoming, and she did not look for it. All she considered was the best means of cheering up Pa. And the best means, she knew, was a hot meal. This she proceeded to serve; and when he was warmed and solaced, and had his slippers on and a pipe in his mouth, Pa was in a fit mood to hear about the children and to be asked the vital question.

"Were you able to?" she questioned.

The answer was the production of a small pawnticket from Pa's pocket.

"Just enough," he said. "We shall do all right."

Ma nodded. The pledge had been her engagement ring, and it had been a rather difficult thing for her to part with. But the money had to be found somewhere for this new hazard; and to pawn her ring had been a simple way of finding it. Ma never recovered her engagement ring; but she did not know that she was not to do so. And it had come into her head that perhaps the origin of their continued ill-luck and struggle with poverty was just this attempt to maintain the house with the marble doorstep.

True, Felix had been born in the unlucky house; but she was beginning to hate it. So quickly does a sensitive person colour with her own sorrows the walls by which she is surrounded and the roof which shelters her from the outer elements.

vi

When at last Ma went up to bed, she found Felix lying in a cot that was slightly tumbled. He was awake, his face flushed, and his eyes wide open. But he had not called out until Ma came into the room. When she saw Felix awake, Ma did not attempt to restrain the pleasure she had from the sight, but went to his side and smoothed his hair away from his forehead.

"Hullo! Not asleep, old chap!" she exclaimed.

"Ma," said Felix, rather fretfully. "I got a fee-fee."

"No! Where?"

"On my back." He turned, and Ma brought her light nearer.

"I expect it's only a tickly," she urged; but in her mind was the thought that with all the disturbance in the house some unknown flea might have made his appearance.

"No, it's a fee-fee," asserted Felix.

Ma made careful search for the alleged intruder. There was no sign of him. Felix's young shoulder was rather reddened, but probably as the result of a detached hair which had fallen inside his nightgown. Ma gave the shoulder a little rub, and buttoned the nightgown once more.

"It must have been a tickly," she told him. "It can't be a fee-fee."

Felix became positive. His head moved from side to side in his transient exasperation at being contradicted. It was as though his knowledge had been doubted.

"It *is* a fee-fee!" he declared, with the utmost vigour;

and then, to add crushing corroboration, "Cod I heard its *woice!*"

vii

Less than six hours later, Felix was again awakened; but this time it was Ma who was trying to rouse him from slumber. He opened his eyes, and was instantly in full possession of his wits. It was pitch dark, and the room was lighted only by a lamp which stood upon the chest of drawers. It was very cold.

"Get up now, duckie," said Ma. Felix looked out of bed, and saw Pa tying his tie in front of the looking-glass, standing in his shirt sleeves, with red braces over his shoulders. A funny lop-sided shadow made uncouth gestures upon the blank wall facing Felix's cot.

"It's dark!" he said protestingly. But he rose as requested, rather sleepy still, and not in particularly good spirits, standing while Ma whipped off his nightgown and dressed him in his little day garments. He put his hands in his trouser-pockets, and tried to whistle; but he was shivering. As Felix was being washed, Godfrey came leaping into the room.

"I believe I can hear it!" cried Godfrey, but in a whisper, as they were all whispering this morning, impressed by the day's chill earliness and the knowledge of unpleasant adventure.

"What?" asked Felix. "What can you hear?"

"The van, silly."

"Are we . . . are we going out, Ma!" Felix was not very clear about all this movement, but when he listened he could hear the grinding skir of slow wheels in the gravelled road. The sound came nearer, still in the darkness; and Godfrey, peeping through the lowered Venetian blinds, announced that it was indeed the van which was arriving. He moved away from the window, like an elf

in this distorting light. Felix, too, saw a dim outline, and two unsteady oil-lamps at the head of it, and heard a faint sound of harness as horses jerked their nosebags. A little creaking and dumping, and the door-knocker rat-tatted faintly as the door was pushed back by somebody carrying in a load. Then, from downstairs, where the front door had been opened by Grumps, arose the indescribable and unforgettable smell of furniture-removers' packing. It was the first time Felix had smelt this, and it excited him as not even the darkness and lights and noise had done.

There was a general move downstairs to meet the men who had accompanied the van and who were looking through the house to see what furniture should be loaded first. There were four men, three of them youngish and the fourth grey-haired and rascally. The young ones were amateurs, as their experiments in lifting showed; but the elderly one knew his business. The others tramped after him, sheep-like, joking among themselves, throwing their coats over the knobs of the bannisters and beginning to pick up small articles which by their leader's instructions they had to put down again. The gas had been lighted in all the rooms downstairs, but all it did was gradually to reveal to the uncomfortable Felix how bare and horrible the whole house looked when it was being dismantled.

Pictures stood against the walls, carpets were rolled, stair-rods hastily tied together with pieces of string. It was Ma who went from room to room seeing that everything was clear and in order. Felix, under Godfrey's care, was taken to the kitchen, where a fire had been lighted by the resourceful Grumps. Grumps, in fact, made them all some hot tea; but as he drank his own he suddenly lost his temper, and began swearing and expostulating to himself with terrifying husky energy. As for Pa, he stood moodily in room after room, getting

always in the way of some one or other of the men, and gradually losing his temper also as the result of so much nervous strain. But presently he and Ma both joined the little group in the kitchen, and drank tea; and then Ma washed the cups and Godfrey dried them very carefully.

Every now and then a piece of furniture would be banged against the stair-rails, and each time this happened both Grumps and Pa would ejaculate with anger. They were both white, extraordinarily angry; and shouted at each other as if with enmity. They seemed to be saying to each other: "If it wasn't for you, this would never have happened." But in some way it became clear that the person with whom they were both most consumedly angry was Ma, who slipped out of the kitchen and came back again, and who could be heard answering questions elsewhere in the house. When she went out of the kitchen, Pa gloomily followed her, and stood at the foot of the stairs in the way of men bringing down a chest-of-drawers from one of the bedrooms and men coming from one of the front rooms carrying chairs and cushions. He moved out of the way, and followed Ma again, this time into the room that was most nearly cleared.

"Where's that damned old hunk, the chief of the gang!" he demanded, accusingly, of Ma. His hatred, his passionate craving to wash his hands of the proceedings, was intense. It haunted him. Before Ma answered, he had savagely added: "I'm sick and tired of the whole affair."

The phrase was familiar to Ma. She had heard it many times in the course of her married life, and was to hear it many times more. She nevertheless answered:

"The old man is outside, packing the things into the van."

"It's getting light," grumbled Pa. "They were late."

"I'm glad they didn't come earlier, because we shouldn't have been ready."

"We aren't ready now."

Ma did not answer, which irritated him further. He was sorry for his harshness and ashamed of himself, but his particular form of pride did not allow him to apologise; and so he continued to stand frowning. In the kitchen, things were no better; for one of the men had robbed Grumps of the table upon which he had been sitting, and when Grumps dived in to assist the man one of the legs of the table had caught him on the side of the head. If the children had not been there Grumps would probably have smashed the table; but as he was prevented from violence by their presence he relapsed into martyrdom. They could hear footsteps echoing upon the bare boards upstairs. Every sound was exaggerated in the grim half-light of the chilly morning.

A diversion was caused by the discovery of Tippetty-Witchet, growling faintly, who was hiding and trembling in the bottom of the kitchen cupboard, his stomach upon the ground. The children rescued him. Godfrey stroked and stroked until Tippetty-Witchet reluctantly lost some of his fear, only starting at times, and listening dreadfully to the echoes; but it was Felix who saved the situation finally by finding a drain of milk in the jug and pouring it into Tip's pannikin.

"There, Tip," he was heard to say. "Twy that. It'll make a man of you."

The joke was too good for Grumps to keep to himself. His anger disappeared, and he sought the other grown-ups. So relieved was he that he began to lend a hand with the moving. And although Pa continued to carry a towel-horse from one room to the other and back again, feeling each instant more inept and ruffled, he was less angry. As for Ma, she rejoined her children and gave

them comfort by her presence, deriving comfort no less from their composed and inquisitive attitude to the proceedings. Tip was put into Godfrey's charge, and so long as he was kept away from the men he did not struggle. Matters were definitely improved, even though their hearts were all constricted by the cheerlessness of the emptying house, and the desperate situation which their flight indicated. The children did not know what the whole thing meant. Felix at any rate understood nothing. That Godfrey had an excited and unmoral inkling was indicated by one comment. His mind had gone to the tall man who had arrived just behind himself at mid-day. And he suddenly cried, in excellent mimicry:

"I've called for the wattah rate."

Ma shivered, and shook her head rebukingly.

"No, Godfrey!"

"Oh, but Ma . . . When he comes, and finds . . ."

Felix listened, coming closer in order to do so. Godfrey found himself alone with Felix. "D'you know what he'll say, Felix?" There was a shaken head. Godfrey whispered.

viii

It was over. By the time it was day the house was empty of all furniture and the van had started upon its long journey from High Field. The doors had all been shut, and Grumps and Pa had gone on in advance to the railway station to buy tickets for the party. Ma was dressed in her long brown coat, with a small hat trimmed with brown velvet; and Godfrey and Felix were upon either side of her, both wearing little blue overcoats and sailor hats. They walked quietly and as quickly as the shorter steps of Felix would allow; and so reached the hill down to the station. The sun was risen. It was day. And Ma walked with her head down, and tears in her

eyes, not daring to look back at the house they were leaving. None of them looked back. From the basket which Godfrey carried could be heard muffled groans as Tippetty-Witchet expressed his tragic fear and discomfort. And as they came near the station the train was signalled; and Pa hurried out to urge them on, his face pale with the sense that the strain of the whole thing had been upon his shoulders. He took Felix's hand, and they ran.

Fortunately, as it was so early, the family had a compartment to themselves, and Felix looked out of the window as the train began to move. His interest wavered, however, and he regarded the other occupants of the carriage, tucking his hand within Ma's arm. And as he did this, Felix recalled the jest which Godfrey had whispered in his ear perhaps an hour ago. Characteristically unafraid of appropriating the words of others, and still less afraid of adapting them, as he did in this case, Felix remarked, moving them all thereby to the suppressed laughter of consternation:

"Oh, wattah life!"

CHAPTER III: ILLNESS IN THE FAMILY

i

IN the district which embraces Farringdon Road, Clerkenwell Road, and Grays Inn Road, or in other words upon the borders of Clerkenwell and Holborn, there are several blocks of big dwellings resembling convict-settlements. These blocks are very tall; and from the large yard which forms a common playground for the children of all residents it can be seen that the staircases leading to the various flats are of stone. Railings protect each half-landing. Everything about these dwellings is ugly. That is the first impression that one receives. The second is a sense of marvel that any human beings can live amid such surroundings. How is it possible, one asks, that children can be born there, and that, being born, they can survive? Not alone does the grim foulness of the asphalt yard repel the observer, but the general grey squalor, the greasy heaviness of the atmosphere, the airlessness and ingrained filth of the whole block and aspect of life, are such as to create despair. Windows tightly closed, poor cheap imitation lace curtains within, and then nothing but a black and hideous gulf behind the curtains. One sees these things with quick repugnance.

A second glance shows that even here, in this place created by a cruel and mechanical civilisation, the spirit of man still lives. The frames of the window and the coat of paint upon the windowsills may be drab; the railings may be painted drab or maroon; the stairs may be as loathsomely ugly as those of prisons and hospitals; but

upon many of the sills may be counted window-boxes filled with brightly-coloured flowers, and although the staircases may be dingy they have been carefully and thoroughly sluiced. Children playing may have pale faces, and by the end of the day may be dirty, but the hair-ribbons of the girls are bright, and their pinafores, if common and frayed, begin the days clean. Moreover, the dwellers in these ugly buildings are as a rule honest and hard-working. They are rough, and many of their ways are uncouth and dull; but they are trained early in a hard school of endurance which forms character. If the atmosphere were better the level of health would be higher; but the noise of trams and omnibuses and drays, the heavy smell that arises in any district where there is a brewery, and the rareness with which the sky is seen above that grey haze of smoke, make health and vigour unusual. Whatever stamina there may be is entirely constitutional, that is to say, and owes nothing at all to the environment.

It was to one of these blocks of dwellings that Pa and Ma and Godfrey and Felix came when they left High Field so early upon that Autumn morning. It was in one of the cramped and tasteless flats in Palmerston Buildings that they lived for four years.

ii

The Hunters had no window-boxes. There was no time to tend them. They had a small three-roomed flat, very dark, and very cell-like. They had hardly any furniture. They had no clothes or money or possessions. Pa kept on looking for daily jobs in his dying trade, and sometimes found them, and more often did not find anything at all. If he could pick up five-shillings-worth of work it was a red-letter day. Ma learned how to live

and keep her children upon the sad oddments of food that she could afford to buy. She shopped from the stalls in Leather Lane, and learned what good meals could be made from the cheapest parts of butchered animals, and what good meals could be made without meat at all. And the children grew four years older. Felix began to go to school, and Godfrey was the one who took him there and brought him home. They were great friends, and Godfrey was as kind as it was possible for one little boy to be to another who was five years younger than himself. The two would start off on the morning, Felix singing :

"Schoolfellow now take my arm,
Never mind the weather . . ."

—and they would come home to mid-day dinner and go back afterwards to school. In the evening they played with other children in the asphalted space below, and Godfrey became proficient in the art of roller-skating, the one great pastime for the colder months for which the yard afforded proper scope. Tipcat was forbidden, and ball-games were difficult owing to the danger of broken windows, lost balls, adults infuriated by the shouting, and so on. And it was in this way that roller-skating became the rage in Palmerston Buildings.

Pa often worked at home now. He could not afford to keep on his office alone, and the efforts of Mr. Pelch to establish a new brand of adhesive paste having failed, Mr. Pelch had disappeared without paying his rent, and without, as it appeared, paying for the manufacture of the paste itself. Moreover, as Grumps was in another house, a tenement house, in Clerkenwell, working there, it followed that Pa must either work with Grumps or in his own home. He tried first the one and then the other, when he had any work to do; and both left him without comfort and without enough money to do more than pay

the rent. As a consequence, Ma made all the clothes for both her little boys, and the boys went to a school which was next to being a free school, and the meals eaten by the family were in every case miracles of thought and execution. The Hunters' flat was always clean, and well-scrubbed; and the boys were always clean and neat; and the family maintained its own cheerfulness. It was not a spurious cheerfulness, or a religious or deliberate cheerfulness. It arose spontaneously from the fact that Ma and the boys were always interested and amused. When they had nothing else to interest and amuse them they had always plenty of material in Pa, who, rightly regarded, was capable of providing interest and amusement for a whole battalion of half-starved Anglo-Scots.

iii

Pa was English—and debased-Midland English—to the backbone. His own father, "the Old Chap at Farley Street," had come as a child from some part of the midlands. The Old Chap was mysterious as to the precise part, but the general locality was not denied. He always pretended to have had no parents at all. Being a clever boy at his trade, which was that of glass-cutting, the Old Chap was successful in business, had a large family of five sons and three daughters, and made money which he ultimately lost in backing horses. He lived in state in a tall old house in Islington, and the sons and daughters, with their wives or husbands, were expected to dine at the house every Sunday at three o'clock in the afternoon. There they could snarl and bicker among themselves until it was time to go home, while the Old Chap, snarling and bickering more loudly than anybody else, rubbed his hands in glee at the rich entertainment. He was a white-faced, bald-headed, stoutly-built old man, with long hori-

zontal folds and creases in his bulging waistcoat, and the large light fingers of the craftsman. And he enjoyed the sense of being master of this company of his children and their wives, all jealous of one another, all measuring their respective incomes, prospects, clothes—all entirely bourgeois and without sensibility or taste. So it had always been, and so it was until the Old Chap's débâcle some years later, when he lived on small doles (small because of the Old Chap's betting habits) provided by those of his children who had met with worldly success. There were three of these—a daughter who married a Civil Servant, and two sons who turned their attention to trades quite distinct from their father's. One daughter went on to the stage, and was rarely mentioned; the third did not marry until she was well on in life. Of the other sons the eldest followed his father's craft and was ultimately overwhelmed in its collapse; the youngest followed horses to his ruin; and Malcolm, the handsome brother, the talented member of the family, became the Pa we know.

Now in his young days Pa had been a sport in this family. Where the others had been apparently strong sons of their midland father, Malcolm had been a student. How deep his knowledge went I do not know; but Pa certainly had some scholarship. He had read a good deal of theology, and he had desired as a boy above all things to be a preacher. But the Old Chap would have no such nonsense in one of his dependent offspring. A trade it must be. Malcolm must be apprenticed. And by a curious mischance for Godfrey and Felix, Malcolm was apprenticed to the firm managed by Grumps. Pa quickly met Grump's daughters; he grew up; he married the eldest of them. From what slight seeming accidents do the greatest of disasters arise! I have many times observed Felix working backwards through the troubles of his life to the fount of them all—that cantankerousness

upon the part of the Old Chap at Farley Street. The two were never friends, in spite of some early rapprochements due to the recognition of Hunter features, because the Old Chap expected obedience, and shouted for it; whereas Felix, being the grandson also of Grumps, has never been shouted at without shouting back in a voice louder than that of the original shouter.

And so Pa, defrauded of career among the ministers of nonconformity, became in embryo an engraver of visiting-cards and cheques and certificates and business note paper headings. In the evenings, like some hero of old-fashioned novels and contemporary films, he read in secret in his bedroom (possibly, but not certainly, a garret) by the light of a candle. He attended classes and lectures at the Working Men's College, and once or twice saw Frederick Dennison Maurice himself in the institution which he had founded. It was a time for Carlyle and Emerson, for Froude and George Eliot and the "Life of Jesus" by Strauss. A time for Butler's "Analogy of Religion" to be seriously read, and Whateley's "Logic." Above all, for Pa, it was a time for John Stuart Mill. Literature was "broad," "deep," "powerful," "profound," "suggestive," and "earnest." Stirring times, those, in the world of rather serious learners. Times when students and readers felt the wiser and the more superior for their intellectual effort. Pa's gravity was increased. He began to put a finger to his forehead as he read. The finger went finally, but the forehead remained. Those were the days when brows were admired, before Mr. Wells introduced his devastating classification of men by the backs of their heads, and dismissed a brow as so much *façade*.

Ma, at that time a young girl named Jessie McNaughtan, laughed but was impressed, was impressed but laughed. While her second sister was making hay of several eligible young men through a natural mobility of

temperament, Ma fell in love with Malcolm; and, to do him justice, Malcolm fell in love with Ma. They had long delightful walks and talks, and none understood him so well as she. For once this common assumption of young lovers was well-founded. It was Ma who had the intelligence and the education; it was Pa who had the intellect. Not a first-class intellect, perhaps; but if he had been able to follow his bent he might have done better. He was condemned to follow a trade which he disliked; his poverty lost him all his friends, who were not many in number; and, marrying at twenty-seven, he had not the grit or the opportunity to retrieve the situation by breaking from his degenerate trade.

iv

Ma sometimes was forced to rest. Do you know the feeling of being afraid that you are ill, and not daring to tell anybody else, in case it should be true? That was her state in the months round about Felix's sixth birthday. Ma found her energy slackening. She slept heavily, started at noises, felt at times that she could bear these rooms, and this squalid life in Palmerston Buildings, no longer. There was a heaviness, a frightening heaviness, in her head. More often than ever now, when the boys had gone back to school, she hurried from the flat, round through Saffron Hill to Farringdon Road. Here in the house opposite the prison, which stood where the Mount Pleasant parcels post office now is, lived Grumps and Gran'ma. It was a hideous house, but the sense of escape was magical. She could breathe in those lofty rooms, away from the scene of her daily horror; she had not to look at four walls which grew always menacingly nearer, to breathe the air that seemed the more polluted because it was filled with the heaviness of malt.

At home she could not breathe at all, and she was alarmed by intense pain at her breast. One day she hastily put some needlework into a little ginger-coloured rope handbag, and with this her only pair of scissors, which were like shears, in order that the hour of escape might not be unemployed. She was feeling very ill indeed. And in hurrying through Saffron Hill, a narrow street of dark and crumbling houses in which lived only Italians, Ma received a shock. A big Italian ran at her and plunged his hand into the bag. But the big Italian also received a shock, for the shears were standing with their points upward. He ran away, with no reward for his adventure but a bleeding palm. Ma did not dare to stop. She ran frantically into Roseberry Avenue. Nor had she the strength to complete her journey, but dragged her way back to Palmerston Buildings, fainting. The pain in her chest had increased; she was panting and coughing, her face flushing and paling; and as she coughed a hideously familiar sound caught her ear and filled Ma with panic terror. There was nobody to tend her. She was alone. She groped her way to the bed and lay stretched there, fully dressed, with the fear of death within her and her responsibilities as a menacing cloud upon her brain.

That was a terrible afternoon. Godfrey and Felix came home from school and knocked and knocked at the front door for so long that their hearts had sunk by the time Ma was able to crawl to admit them. They were alarmed, but could do nothing. They did not know whereabouts in London Pa might be; and Ma was in no state to tell them what otherwise might be done. The hours crept by, alarmingly slow, and darkness came and grew into night. Still Ma lay breathing heavily in the black bedroom, with the traffic rumbling by in the street outside. Lamps winked at the children as they crouched by

the window, looking out at the dim moving vehicles, and then into the room where Ma was lying half-insensible and made the more ill by her ghastly alarm.

Pa did not reach home until late in the evening, and even then he did not understand at first how severe the illness was. He had been wandering all day from office to office in search of work, and had found none. He was now tired and miserable; and in his first alarm was irritable and sullen because there had been prepared no meal for him to eat and because he felt irrationally that Ma had no business to be ill. It was the sight of the two boys sitting very silent and afraid in that wretched scene that first roused him to active alarm.

"How long has Ma been lying down?" he asked.

"Hours," answered Godfrey, his breath catching. He was more frightened than Felix, who was only vaguely alarmed. Godfrey, being older, saw more clearly, felt more certain that this was a just occasion for terror. He could not restrain his secret thought, but whispered: "I think she's dying."

"Oh! Oh!" cried Felix, with sudden passionate grief. He rose, and would not be restrained by his father, but ran to his mother's side, hiding his face in her breast as she lay helpless. Ma, panting, choking for breath, gave a little faint, apologetic, laughing noise, and put her hand upon Felix's head.

"I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry," she murmured; and to Pa, who was now stricken with fear more restrained which was nevertheless the sequel of the children's fear: "I'm so sorry to be a nuisance . . ." It was her one thought.

v

In spite of everything, a doctor had to be called; and the knowledge that this could not be avoided gave the two

grown-ups additional pain. Malcolm had helped his wife to undress and get between the blankets of the bed—they had no sheets—and she was a little more at ease. But if no longer sullen with the irritation of alarm, Pa was sober and anxious. Fear always affected him thus. He could not act resourcefully. He was paralysed, and could only dwell among apprehensions. And he knew that not only was there no money with which to pay the doctor, but when the doctor came he would see the state of the furniture, the bedclothes, everything in the flat. Pa was shamed. He saw these things himself, in a new fumbling awareness of failure and poverty and the fruitlessness of his struggle. All was clean, it was true; but so patched and worn, so lacking and inadequate, that both he and Ma could have wept with pain that such discomfort should be seen by one outside the family.

Ma continued to lie almost senseless while Pa was away at the doctor's, and Godfrey and Felix, unaware of hunger, stayed beside her. Through Ma's mind there roamed all sorts of vague dreams and wonders as of delirium. And every now and then she would start amid her painful breathing and her fever, and as she flushed afresh would ejaculate that the doctor must not come, must not see the place so untidy and shameful and poverty-stricken; and would again fall to murmuring her sorrow at being ill—as if it were an offence against them all, and not the severest misfortune to herself.

And when the doctor came he looked at nothing but the patient, because he was used to poverty in this district; and in taking her temperature he became markedly grave.

"You had any trouble with your lungs before?" he asked.

Ma slowly nodded, unable to speak, and looked entreatingly at Pa.

"When she was a girl," he explained. "Twenty years ago—she had inflammation of one of the lungs."

"Well, she's got 'em both now," said the doctor. "You'll need somebody to look after her. She can't be moved." He was a big, abrupt Irishman, who looked like John Bull, and who made the room appear more like a cell than ever. He was renowned for his great candour with his patients, but the Hunters did not know this. Ma groaned. "It's no use your groaning," said the doctor. "Or worrying. Not a bit. The only thing is to get well, d'ye see. You must keep warm. Got any hot-water bottles? That's bad. I'll talk to your husband here—oh, I'll be gentle with him; don't fear! I'll send you some medicine. You're very ill." At the door he turned. "We'll soon have you right," he added, "to whip those two big boys as they deserve!"

At which Felix laughed. Poor Felix! He was to laugh once again in this doctor's presence, and was to have a spoon over his tongue as a consequence. But of that in its due place.

vi

The next day Godfrey took Felix to school as usual, and ran home. He was to do this for many days. Auntie Lallums could not come to assist because—ironically—she was a probationer in a London hospital; Gran'ma was by this time a chronic invalid; Ma's remaining sister was many thousands of miles away. It was for Pa to make what money he could in the intervals of anxious watching. One or two neighbours gave friendly time in the hours of extremest need. Often, however, Ma was left entirely alone while Godfrey ran along to bring Felix home from school; and when Felix one day put his foot through a grating and bruised and lacerated his leg she was forced, against all wisdom, to rise and

show Godfrey how to bathe and bandage the unfortunate limb. And so it came about that one of Felix's minor misfortunes almost escaped notice. He had been put into the lowest class at school upon his first arrival there; but as his juvenile cleverness became apparent the teachers resolved upon placing him among the senior infants at a single advance. Unfortunately Felix, always a person of strong personal affections, was devoted to the teacher of his original class, and disliked the teacher of the highest class. There was a terrible scene at school. Felix refused flatly to accept his new honour. The work of the whole school was interrupted. Only after a fit of passionate sobbing, and the utterance of several truths which occurred to his infant mind, was Felix induced to accept the transference. It was all the more hard upon him because he was deprived of his mother's care, and because he was being tended by the rather rough-and-ready Godfrey. He was an unhappy little boy. As he tearfully said to his mother, in narrating the course of events:

"And they said . . . said I was too . . . too clever to sit with the illifants, Ma. . . . And I don't *want* to be . . . clever. I want to be with Miss . . . Bascombe!"

As for Godfrey, he was now eleven. He was not especially tall for his years; but in his striped "top" and blue knickers, and his blue cap with its lighter stripes running from the centre button and creating six triangular spaces, he was a pride to his mother. He was remarkably handsome, like a foreign little boy, with his straight black hair, his straight, well-shaped nose, and his straight, sensitive mouth. His voice, too, was beautiful, and his smile very sweet. People stopped to speak to him in the street, and he had such an air of distinction as to be easily recognisable, even in a group. He had something

of Pa's cold, sensitive storing up of grievances in his heart and readiness to take offence. He could not hide his feelings, but showed them at once. A curious, elusive nature, the nature, Ma thought, of an artist. She herself had something of that, but she had a sobriety of judgment which was impossible to Godfrey. He was quick, careless, untidy, full of life, like a brilliant creature only half-tamed; but there were perils in his temperament. It was partly because of this unexpected hindrance to understanding that Pa was already conscious of antagonism to Godfrey; but in part, also, the antagonism was due to unrecognised similarity of character.

Strangely enough, both boys had links with her husband that endeared them to Ma. If Godfrey had something of his nature, Felix had something (and increasingly something) of Pa's physical appearance. He was definitely a Hunter, although in Ma's eyes, a dolichocephalic Hunter and one transfigured by charm and curly copper hair until the Hunter mould was well-nigh hidden. Both boys were a happiness to her in this time of acute trial, but Godfrey more than Felix, because Godfrey was her devoted and untiring attendant, whereas Felix was only an amusement and a relaxation.

vii

Ma's illness continued for a long time, and at last, very gradually, she became better. And with one of the vagaries which were to beset the Hunters for many years yet, trade unexpectedly improved. Jobs came rolling in. Inky apprentices with discoloured aprons dashed round from the ridiculously named Swan, Rider, and Shooter's in the main road nearby, bringing wads of orders. All the respectable firms in London made up their minds at once to have new bill-heads, notepaper, business cards,

labels, and similar articles engraved by Pa. He sat turning copper plates upon his sandbag, and digging sharp gravers into them until late each night; and the gravers would come out of the copper bringing fine threads of it with them, and the plates would move about upon the sandbag with a sticky sound almost like that of a kiss exchanged by relations. Pa also, during this period, became the close friend of his younger son, loving him so much that even when he was most busy he would spare the little time that was necessary in amusing Felix or in starting Felix upon the path of self-amusement. And Ma was well again, and warm weather arrived, and Godfrey and Felix became once more noisy and happy; and all three were sent away by the labouring Pa to the seaside.

They went to Brighton. In those days everybody went to Brighton, and apart from one visit to Hastings the Hunters never in their lives went to any other English seaside resort. To them, if one said "the seaside," Brighton rose immediately as a picture. They loved Brighton. Felix, I find, still loves it. Even the week-end parties and the vulgar rich cannot spoil the place for him. He loves the big houses on the way to Black Rock, and the Hove lawns, and the streets behind the Marine Parade, and even, for old acquaintance sake, Volk's Electric Railway and the bowling greens and bathing machines of the Madeira Road. They all give him happiness. They recall days when the Hunters, arriving at the Central Station, walked straight down West Street with their one wicker basket of luggage past the advertisement hoardings, the touts trading in unwanted return-halves of excursion tickets, the phrenologist's shop, the cheap restaurants, right down to the sea. It was a joy to them to come in sight of the sea, for all three to say at once "there it is!" at the first grey streak below the horizon.

They all felt better and happier immediately. And when they had gazed and sniffed, and looked at the bath-chairs and the goat-chaises and the horse-drawn flies, with squares of cotton like dishcloths over the horses' backs, and at the hotels on the front, the Hunters would begin a tramp in search of apartments.

They never—for some reason (probably because the trip to Brighton was always a surprise to them—booked rooms in advance; they never went to an hotel or a boarding house. They sought rooms and took their chance of cleanliness and comfort. This was Ma's job, and I do not expect that she ever made a mistake; for she knew what to look for and where to look. Nevertheless, I gather that there must once have been some misjudgment, for I see that Felix never appropriates a room in a strange hotel without a beating heart and a long apprehensive glance of inquiry at the four corners of the ceiling.

When the rooms upon this occasion had been duly engaged, the Hunters instantly went out-of-doors again. They hurried to see an old man gulp down immense quantities of flame from an old metal spoon, and to turn a fascinated shuddering glance upon the sword-swallower, and to come to anchor, as it were, in the largest crowd of all—which was that gathered to attend the nigger minstrels. Here Ma left Felix in charge of Godfrey, and went to do her shopping for tea and supper and the following day. The smell of sea and seaweed and fish and hot asphalt was in her nostrils, and she was perversely happy. Alone, the two children listened and laughed and laughed again to hear the niggers with their blackened faces and busy hands upon bones and banjos and tambourines, singing "Then he winked the other eye," and "Sister Mary walks like that," and one exquisite lyric which ran:

"There's a beautiful blue in the beautiful sky,
There's a beautiful blue in the water;
But give me the blue in the beautiful eye
Of Betsy the Buttermen's Daughter."

The sea, the scrunching pebbles of the beach, the sun, the general air of lazy diversion, the donkeys ambling and trotting over the asphalt immediately below the esplanade, the somnolent horses with little straw hats over their ears, and these minstrels who for years, until they were driven out of existence by some local legislation, gave entertainment in which Felix and Godfrey certainly never saw any unpleasant allusion, were all part of the inexhaustible entertainingness of Brighton. To them had to be added at this time the Scotch Family, who played and sang dressed in the garb of their native land, and Mr. Hardy the ventriloquist, with his boy Joey. When the Hunter boys could not hear one of these they could hear another; and if Ma at any time lost them she had only to walk along the Front until she came to the niggers or the ventriloquist, where she would immediately retrieve her children and would hear from them in perfect detail the latest song within five minutes of its first rendering before a Brighton audience.

Both boys had an abnormally quick ear for music or peculiarities of speech, and the capacity to reproduce what they heard. They were born mimics. So early, Godfrey was marked out for the stage, and this in spite of Ma's secretly shaken head. Ma saw their natural cleverness, and guessed that it might lead to nothing at all. She was afraid of it. She recognised and was thankful for the exceptional qualities of her two children, and she loved both with a close and proud and solicitous love. But she was not blind to weaknesses which were and are imperceptible by casual observers. Both boys did everything so quickly, so easily, so unostentatiously. She felt

in advance what a woman said many years later of Felix. "The man who did this," said she (I have forgotten what "this" was) "would be a success in any profession." Ma, more wisely yet, added the supplement: "Or a failure." She would not think of the prospect; she would think only of the present blessed fortnight by the sea, in which it was her own duty to grow strong and well, and the boys' duty to grow stronger and better.

So the trio—the two bright, happy children, and the small woman with the clear skin and subdued manner, bold and remorseless only in defence of her young—went about Brighton. Godfrey's olive complexion mellowed and ripened; the cheeks and nose of Felix flushed a ruddy red and vehemently peeled. At this point in his colouring other children were pulled hurriedly away from him by terrified mothers who thought he had a skin complaint. Imagine Ma's indignation! Imagine Felix's bewilderment! It was the more heart-breaking to Felix because at this age he was already of an amorous disposition, drawn as if by magnetic attraction to young persons, if they were pretty, of the opposite sex.

viii

In regard to women Felix was always a complete sentimentalist. I should not be able to give any notion of the number of times he has been attracted, half-in-love, altogether in love. A busy-body once said: "Good old Felix. For a red-haired man he doesn't have enough love affairs." She knew nothing at all. Would that her words had been true! Quite half the happiness of Felix would have been disposed of at a single blow. He has made friends with many men, but at heart he remains indifferent to them all. Not one has the power to make him swerve from a resolve. But to a woman he has

never been indifferent. He has disliked some of them, and cruelly tormented others with his coldness, his facetiousness, his impatience; but there is a long score on the other side, and indifference lies beyond the capacity of his nature.

And this brings me to the beginning of the sad part of the young man's history. As he himself once said: "It's affections that mess up lives; nothing else." His first real love was a little white-faced girl who lived in the flat next door to the Hunters in Palmerston Buildings. She had lost her mother and father, and lived with grandparents. What particular attractiveness she had I am in no position to disclose; but the real sentimentalist needs no justification of his love. He sees the beloved, I am sure, transfigured. That was what Felix did. He found the little girl, his playfellow, his first betrothed (alas! there have been many!), all that his heart desired. She was his princess, piteous in her lack of father and mother, unsurpassed in wit and beauty. I will go so far as to say that she was the first of the only two young women to rouse Felix to poetic rhapsody. Her name was Edith, and she was fair and pale and fragile. Whether there was any adult opposition I cannot say, but the surviving verse can be read as implying some reserve of consent upon the part of her grandparents. Felix wrote:

"Edie shall be my wife
If I have to lay down my life."

ix

The wooing proceeded with success for a couple of years. It continued after the Hunters left Palmerston Buildings. This they did when Felix was nearly eight. His Gran'ma died then; and Ma went to keep house for Grumps. The Hunters moved with one thrilling motion

of relief. For long Grumps's home had been referred to by Felix—merely in contrast with his own home—as “lovely Farringdon Road”—an adjective which it at no time deserved, being only one degree less foully ugly than Palmerston Buildings. It now became Felix's home, and the home of the other Hunters. It became the scene of feasts and festivities never to be forgotten. Every dread that had cowed Pa and Ma fell away. Life became sweet. Felix was taken shopping in Exmouth Street; he learnt to relish Colonial biscuits and crystallised ginger; he saw the live eels wriggling outside the fishmonger's shop, and averted his very sensitive gaze from their struggles. Godfrey discovered the Clerkenwell Public Library and spent hours there in reading and borrowing books. Everybody was happy, with enough to eat and with enough clothes to wear. Games were many. Godfrey rose in his classes; Felix left the illifants' school altogether, and was promoted to standard one among the big boys. He had a locker to his desk, and a pencil-case, and exercise books in which to do his lessons. It was all splendid. And Ma's other sister, Auntie Julie, came from the other end of the world upon a visit—a little dainty, fairy-like aunt with curling fair hair and big trunks that smelt of the most lovely things and contained exquisite treasures. Felix loved to look at the trunks with their big labels bearing white stars and mystic wording which made him dream of far lands and the trembling of big steamships amid the crashing waves. Very reverently, he would stand by while the treasures which the trunks contained were taken out and passed from hand-to-hand—beautiful carved ivory, sandals, silks, shawls, dresses and trinkets indescribable. And at this time the boys made first acquaintance with “The Mikado,” just then revived at the Savoy Theatre. They also went by themselves very often to the performance of the Mohawk Minstrels at

the Agricultural Hall, and knew all the songs the minstrels sang, from "Clementine" onwards, which they freely rendered in the home. Experience in these affairs led Godfrey to found a troupe of nigger-minstrels of his own, and other boys were induced to join him, with the result that marvellous rehearsals were held in lovely Farringdon Road and a performance was actually given in a rickety hall in a Clerkenwell back street. Burnt cork was at a premium. Only the need for seventeen boys to wash off their darkness in a single pannikin of cold water cast any shadow upon an otherwise perfectly successful entertainment. The boys sang and danced and played from morning to night, in the fulness and height of blithe spirits. Everything was golden sunshine and glory.

Knowing Felix, you will be sure that some disaster was impending, and you will be right. He was stricken with diphtheria.

X

I promised that I would tell you how Felix laughed in the doctor's presence, and the story belongs to this illness. Felix was hidden away at the top of the house, and a sheet which had been soaked in carbolic was hung over the doorway. And Ma nursed him and saved his life, which was very nearly lost. But among all the tortures which went with this disease, Felix hated most the visit of that big Irish doctor, who would come into the room, ask questions of Ma, turn to the bed, pick up a spoon, and, addressing Felix, would bid him "Say 'Ah.' " Felix opened his mouth, the spoon held down his abnormally long tongue; and the doctor peered down his throat. The distress which Felix felt caused him to wish to avoid this scene, and once he hit upon the ingenious plan of pretending to be asleep when the doctor came. The theatre was not in this family's blood for nothing. It

was a highly successful performance. "Let him sleep!" said the doctor, and tip-toed out of the room again. But when the next visit was paid, upon the following afternoon, Felix made the mistake of repeating his performance of a sleeping child. The doctor said "What! Asleep again! I really ought to have a look at him, you know." And then, very reflectively, as he stood over the convincing performer: "I wonder if he'd wake up if I gave him a penny."

It was too much for Felix. He laughed. The spoon held down his tongue very firmly. And he said "A-a-a-ah!"

xi

When he was better, Felix was sent to Brighton to recuperate, in charge of Auntie Lallums. Upon the first day he went down upon the beach and was photographed in company with his aunt, a little white boy who seemed to be nothing but bones, standing beside a young woman of twenty-eight with rather plump cheeks and an abundance of brown hair and a parasol, who was dressed in the ugly full-sleeved, full-skirted costume of that time. Upon the second day, cheered by his greater zeal, Felix and Auntie Lallums walked along the cliffs beyond Black Rock, and saw the poppies and heard the skylark brilliant above their heads in a soft blue sky. They could see the little bird ascending in leaps and flutterings against the force of a strong wind, and hear the lark's valiant song with such clearness that it seemed as though there could be no greater beauty in the world. They were very happy, and as they walked back Felix sang to himself with joy. And when they were indoors, and were sitting in chairs which were said to be easy, there was a long silence of content, at the end of which Felix said suddenly:

"Auntie Lallums!" His voice was strange, thick, un-

intelligible. "Auntie Lallums, it's so funny . . . I can't . . . can't lift my hand."

To his aunt the whole room seemed for one instant of horror to go black. She leapt to her feet, holding his hand, squeezing it, touching his leg, looking at his poor distorted mouth. She was so frightened that at first she could say nothing at all but "Felix, Felix!" Then with her head in a whirl she bade him be still, and hardly knowing what she did she ran to the landlady, to a doctor. It was unavailing. The doctor, hearing the facts, echoed "diphtheria," and shook his head. Felix was helpless. The whole of his left side, including the arm and the leg at which Auntie Lallums had at first so wildly clutched, was paralysed.

In her anguished shock, she could not then bring herself to tell him the truth, but made instant preparations to take him back to London, to take him back to Ma, who had nursed him through his illness and must now nurse him in the affliction which was its still more threatening sequel. And Felix lay there thinking, while the landlady, a dark Frenchwoman with a black moustache and frightening eyes of stealth and calculation, stared at him and away with pitying horror. When Auntie Lallums came back into the room, to wrap her little boy up and take him home, it seemed to her that she could see struggling upon that rather alarmed and rueful white face a distorted smile; and Felix, knowing by her eyes how sorrowful she was, and how afraid, indistinctly mumbled something as if to comfort her. It was not a very ingenious remark that he made, and it was so indistinct that Auntie Lallums could not understand it at all. She came nearer, shrinking at the heaviness of her present responsibility, but resolute in her wish to heal and soften for Felix the first onset of his trouble.

"I can't speak . . . speak . . . oh bother! can't

“speak plainly . . . ” murmured Felix in his new voice of thickness and difficulty. “I’m sorry.”

“No, no. Don’t try to speak, duckie,” said Auntie Lallums. “There isn’t any need. “We’re going home to Ma now—as soon as there’s a train; as soon as I can pack. She’ll make you quite well in a jiffy.”

“Yes.” He nodded. “I know.” And then, repeating his earlier jest: “Now I shall . . . be able to go . . . to go about in a bath-chair!” he stammered, with a feeble cheerfulness that made the tears spring to her eyes. “Like a . . . like a . . . nold gentleman. What luck.”

CHAPTER IV: PROFESSIONS

i

KNEELING by a big box in the front sitting-room, Felix was playing a game of his own invention. He was very white, and his old energy was gone; but at least his limbs were his own again. The two years of paralysis and semi-paralysis had passed. When Ma crept into the room to see how he was it was clear from her expression how tragic had been the experience, and how priceless this period of danger and helplessness had made Felix in her eyes. She remained there for a moment, watching the broad wave of sunlight, as it bathed the little boy, and then as silently went back to her kitchen. Felix did not know she had been into the room.

The doctor had insisted upon a change of atmosphere, and the Hunters had moved out of London again, to one of the northern suburbs, Brenton, which was not five miles from High Field. There they had a small six-roomed house, and there Felix gradually became a human being once more. He was very long about it, for the illness had been severe; but the house was bright and sunny, and Ma had set her will against every unfavourable symptom. He was well. He was recovering strength. As for his spirits, they had never failed. Nor had his power of self-amusement.

This power had faltered occasionally, as it did when reading first palled. Sitting in a chair, or lying at full length upon the hearthrug in front of the fire, with only one hand available for use, Felix had read not only the

works of Miss Alcott and other writers for young people, but novels intended by their authors for persons of mature age. He read solemnly, judged quickly, and expressed his opinions. He was the first to handle any book that came into the house, because he read faster than the others. But there were many hours to be filled, and a little boy of eight, who has had an active and healthy childhood, is not the most ready of human beings calmly to accept the sedentary life of enforced invalidism. Cribbage was introduced by Pa, but it could only be played with somebody else. Dominoes were found intolerable at all times. Yet Felix must be kept still and amused, and the problem was a serious one. And then somebody gave him a box of Halma, a game consisting of certain numbers of yellow, green, red, and black pieces fashioned like very much smaller chess-pawns. The game itself did not interest Felix, but the men were his constant amusement for another five years. They lent themselves to every sort of pastime, from the simplest to the most complicated. As Felix recovered the use of his left arm he was able to extend his enjoyment; and the addition of two further sets of Halma men permitted of elaborate military campaigns upon the tables and hearth-rugs. These campaigns were only spoiled by the senile experimental gestures of Tippetty-Witchet, who never failed to be interested in anything that Felix was doing, and who was often tempted to assist in the game. When Felix expostulated, Tip licked his guilty forepaw, much as My Uncle Toby whistled Lillibulero, and with a similar exasperating effect. He might as well have put it to his black nose.

Large trays of mill-board, manufactured by the ingenuity of Felix himself, and fastened at the corners with knotted string, sometimes enabled a sort of civic game to be prolonged for days. Within the large tray stood

smaller trays, made in the same fashion, but representing shops and houses, the corners joined and bound with adhesive paper. Dominoes were used as horses for the Halmas. The double blank was a magnificent white steed. And as each Halma differed in shape from all the others, the differences being particularly marked in the case of the first lot, every one of them had a baptismal and a family name. One, not remarkable in beauty or size, was called Mr. Felix Hunter; and his prowess in every field was staggering. He could do everything, and in a most superior manner. Clothes were tailored for the men out of the lead paper which came into the house wrapped round packets of Mazawattee Tea. Coats and hats could be made by pressing pieces of this paper, cut to size and shape, close to the forms of the wearers. Shirts of tissue paper of different colours, tied with coloured wool or silk, were worn under these coats and hats. For playing games of cricket or football (seven a-side, with a red wooden bead as the necessary ball) coats and hats were discarded and the tissue paper and wools served as club colours. There were football and cricket championships, there was trade of various kinds (rose leaves and others being sold in carpet emporia, pictures being exhibited, books being published), and there were sermons preached and conversations carried on, with in fact the life of a whole community in action, under the direct control of a beneficent Creator.

At one point in this much-elaborated game, Felix became aware, as the maker of any community of rapid growth must do, that his republic lacked history. The consciousness arose particularly because—since Pa was a reader, and since Felix experimented unsuccessfully with such of Pa's books as had escaped sale in hours of want—he felt the lack of literary classics. But at that time one of the Reverend Augustus Jessopp's collections of histori-

cal essays appeared in the real world under the title of "Before the Great Pillage." Felix did not know what was the "pillage" referred to in this title, but the word had its instant inspiration for him. He accounted for the lack of history in Halmaland by a former great pillage there, which had destroyed all, or nearly all, records. And he deliberately and conscientiously "faked" some old manuscripts of miniature size, charring the edges of them with the aid of a match, and writing upon their surfaces in hieroglyphics. In this way "classics" were manufactured, bearing the names "Abelard," "Boethius," etc., and the Halmas once again held up their heads.

It was before one of the trays of his own manufacture that Felix now knelt. He was conducting a conversation between Lord Yellowe, a substantial fellow with an accidental slice off the top of his head, Mr. Wittick, a portly Green Halma, and Mr. Val Redding. They were standing in Lord Yellowe's house, and had met by appointment. Yellowe clucked his tongue with impatience. "Why doesn't he come?" he asked. Wittick, very grave, answered: "It's not time yet, Yellowe. Hunter's never late." "That's true," muttered the others. And sure enough, as the clock began to strike, a footman appeared. "Mr. Felix Hunter, my lord," he said. And with that Mr. Hunter entered the room. The over-punctuality of the others was in itself testimony to the esteem in which this man was held. Small in comparison with his companions (except Redding, with whom he was of a size), he had affinities in his spiritual creator's eyes with the Lord Roberts of Kipling's celebrated poem. But the business in hand today was not warlike. It was purely a question of arranging the details of an inter-colour football tournament. That matter was decided. It was so clearly desirable that there was no need of discussion. "And now," said Lord Yellowe, "I should much like to

suggest a charity match between ourselves and, say, the Rest of Halmaland. Wittick would be off-back, myself near-back, Redding at half, and yourself, my dear Hunter, near wing. . . ." "And the others?" questioned Hunter shrewdly. "The others we would leave entirely to you, my dear Hunter," said Lord Yellowe. "That, I'm sure, will be the best way." "I think I'd rather play centre myself, and let Yates play near wing," mused Hunter. The others laughed. "Your protégé!" said Wittick. "Well, as you please. But I think . . ." he added; "I think the side should be called 'Felix Hunter's Team.' That will bring the crowd." Mr. Hunter went away with Mr. Redding, for these two, with Mr. Vaughan, were staunch friends. Vaughan was a yellow; and when the Halma game took a domestic turn, as it occasionally did, and the yellow Halmas became women, Vaughan assumed the Christian name of Elsie and became Mr. Felix Hunter's sweetheart or bride. The yellows were men, today; and football upon a table covered with baize was the business in hand. Goals rather ingeniously cut in one piece (net and all) from thin card were kept in place by long upright pins stuck into the table.

Felix suddenly pulled himself to his feet. The sun was shining out of doors. It was very tempting. If he shut his eyes he could see the gravelled roads glistening, and the blue sky gloriously deep through moving brilliant leaves. He was almost entranced by a sense that he was floating in sunshine. He knew that sounds carried far upon such a still day, and he had so strong an imagining of the voices of other children in the distance that he felt he must really go out-of-doors. But alone? That was the difficulty. Godfrey was at school, and in any case, through commerce with boys of his own age who despised "kids," Godfrey was no longer the playmate of Felix. A rather sad look crossed the little boy's face. He walked

to the window, and saw the glitter of the sun everywhere. It was irresistible. Positively, Ma must be made to come out after lunch. They would go along the Priory Road, where the scent of the growing trees with the sun upon them was a divine exhalation. They would see and hear both cows and sheep, and perhaps a carriage, and little boys and girls running and laughing and talking in their happiest way. And as he looked from the window he shrank slightly. Instantly he darted upon tiptoe to the door of the room, and along the passage to the kitchen.

"Grumps!" he whispered. His mouth drew down at the corners, and his eyes comically opened to their widest, until his face looked like a grotesque and imbecile mask. There was quite definite understanding between Felix and his mother. It was as though both had sworn simultaneously.

ii

Grumps gave a long, gentle, infuriating rat-tat-tatti-tatti-tat-tat upon the small knocker, and with arch childishness played a tune upon the letter-box. Before Felix could reach the door the letter-box was again rattled, and he could see Grumps's face pressed close to the coloured glass panel nearest the lock, his eye glaring into the house. Felix ran, in order to avert the tender finger-work which would follow upon the same panel. Grumps was like a dog, or a cat, and when once he wanted to enter a house he could think of nothing but fresh and repetitious ways of making his presence known to those within. Yet when Felix opened the door at a bound, Grumps stooped and drew back as if alarmed, stroking his grey, pointed beard, and looking mysteriously beyond Felix.

"Is anybody at hoome?" he asked, as if timidly.

"Ma," answered Felix, promptly, and opened the door to its widest.

Grumps stepped slowly across the doormat, holding the door-frame with a gripping, trembling hand, a bent and cautious figure. Felix saw his cunning old eyes take in all that was to be seen—the open doors of the sitting-room and kitchen, the polished stair-rails, the clean globe of the gas-lamp above his head. Then, as the front door was closed, Grumps trod softly past the mat, still holding the wall. A huge, a sepulchral groan burst from him. Felix looked callously, but he took his grandfather's shabby old bowler hat and helped him off with his equally shabby thin grey overcoat, which was turning green from long use. A thick chocolate-brown muffler was unwound from Grumps's neck, and hung up with the hat and coat; after which, groaning profusely, Grumps made his way to the most comfortable chair in the room and bent to scratch and to feel his ankles. As he did so his mauve hands with their yellow finger-nails crept gauntly out from a pair of crimson mittens. Felix saw them. He saw the long grey hair hanging over Grumps's dusty coat-collar, and resented the fact that Grumps wore no linen collar to his grey flannel shirt. The elastic-sided boots were slipped from Grumps's feet, to an accompaniment of groans, and Pa's best slippers were substituted. After which, in time to look wanly and pathetically at Ma, Grumps stretched himself upright, his hand sharply to the small of his back, where he was racked evidently by terrible pain.

"Eh, dear . . ." he said, apparently exhausted by his paroxysm of groaning, but being very brave and deprecating. "Ahm not as young as I used to be. And how arrre ye, Jessie?" If Felix had not known Grumps with the piercing eye of childhood he would have been deceived by all this, and in particular by the solicitous tone in which Grumps asked after Ma's health; but he was not deceived. He saw it all as a performance, enabling

Grumps to get the most comfortable chair and wear Pa's slippers, and sit there hour after hour, planning cunningly to stay the night, planning never to leave them. . . . Just when Ma and Felix might have gone out of doors into the brilliant sunshine, and walked in the lanes, and seen the children at play and heard their voices from afar! Hard-hearted Felix. But, at the same time, perceptive Felix! Grumps perhaps had every one of these designs, and he was often aimlessly artful, from sheer excess of mental agility over occupation. After all, Felix knew his own cunning, and compared with Felix Grumps was a child.

When Ma had made her father comfortable, and had gone to bring him half-a-glass of stout, which he ought not to have had, Grumps, seeing her off, as it were, with a volley of groans, addressed himself to the standing and critical Felix, whose thick crop of reddish hair, combed straight to his eyebrows, made the quaint, expressive face beneath look smaller and thinner than ever.

"Well, Felix, and how arrre ye? Top o' the class?" he said, winningly.

"No, Grumps. I don't go to school," shouted Felix.

"Eh? Not such a fool!" asked Grumps, his hand to his ear.

"I . . . don't . . . go . . . to school! Not . . . *well* enough," roared Felix.

"Oh . . . oh . . . oh . . ." Grumps groaned a little; but that was because Ma was returning with his half-glass of stout. He drank it lingeringly, and Felix could hear the horrid indrawing of his breath as he tilted the glass up and strove to gain the last clinging remnants of froth from the sides of it. By this time, rather grim at having his dream of a happy afternoon frustrated, Felix had resumed the Halma game; and Mr. Felix Hunter, upon leaving Lord Yellowe, Mr. Wittick, and Mr. Red-

ding, had hurried to his own study, where he was soon busily engaged in his brilliant translation of the surviving works of Boethius for the Halma publisher, De Valera (a fine big green fellow), who was bent upon bringing the pre-Pillage classics within the reach of all. De Valera was the Dent of Halmaland, and not even potentially a green president.

The play was only interrupted by a fresh cascade of groans, announcing the return of Ma with a suggestion that Felix should lay the table for dinner; and by the arrival home from school of Godfrey.

iii

Godfrey took little notice of the others upon his appearance. He entered the room much as a cardinal might have done upon a ceremonial occasion. He had grown very much, and was still a handsome boy; but the dignity of his bearing had in it something that prompted a question in the mind of a beholder. He was what Ma called "at an age," but he was also "of a kind," and his pre-occupation was unusual in a boy. His sensitiveness was such that he took offence at all sorts of accidents, and would sit very silent if the meal were unpunctual, and would eat with a frown upon his face. Immediately he had finished his lunch he would rise from the table and leave the house without a word. His manner then would be that of a stranger. He would be speechless for long periods, looking pale and distrait. Upon his mouth would be a slight self-consciousness, as though he were exaggerating the amount of attention or deliberate disregard which he had provoked. And then again Godfrey would forget whatever was troubling him and would burst high-spiritedly into tales of the boys and masters at school, and mimicry of them. Every care would vanish, every

solemnity dissolve. None could be more gay and more charming. He would sometimes burlesque Felix's football crowd noises, for Felix was scrupulously realistic—a pre-Raphaelite among world-makers. And at other times he would be, quite unexpectedly, a natural and exceptionally well-mannered boy of fifteen. He was an enigma to all except his patient, sympathetic, and only occasionally bewildered mother.

"Ma," said Godfrey, in the course of the meal. "Got any money?"

A fierce groan burst from Grumps. The boys exchanged a glance, and Ma raised her brows in warning. But Grumps, imagining that they were taking advantage of his deafness by speaking very quietly, shot suspicious eyes from one to the other, and began to crumble his bread.

"Eh?" he lingeringly inquired. "What was that?"

"Nothing, Grumps!" roared Felix.

The old man nodded, smiling benevolently; and then added:

"And how's Godfrey? Top o' the——"

"Yes!" cried Godfrey. Grumps clapped his hands.

"That's the style!" he commended. "I remember when I was your age, Godfrey boy, I used to get up airily in the morning, and go away up into the hills and sing and learn ma lessons."

"We haven't got any hills here, Grumps," Godfrey informed him.

"I didn't say ye had, did I?" asked Grumps, with a quiet, ferocious dignity.

"Have you heard from Lily?" said Ma.

Grumps put a trembling hand into each of his pockets, while the boys solemnly watched him over their raised forks; and then slowly got up and went to the door, which he left wide open while he searched his overcoat. From

this at last he produced an unopened letter which he brought back to the table. He then, with similar slowness and difficulty, during which the boys ate their food and looked bored, being tired of the elaborate performance, found his spectacles.

"I don't know if this is from her," he said. "No, I see it is not. It came this morning, and I put it into my pocket. Wait a bit; wait a bit." With a table knife (for although the boys were farther on with their meal he was still dealing with his vegetable soup, and had not yet used his knife), Grumps slit open the envelope and began to read the letter which had been contained in it. As he read, his face changed. The hand which had been aimlessly stirring his spoon about in the soup was still.

Ma had left her place and had gone to bring in the apple-pudding so that the boys at least need not wait. She knew Grumps's present-day method of lingering through a meal, and she knew that Godfrey's time and Felix's patience were alike limited. But when she returned to the room the letter was cast upon the table, and Grumps was groaning and wiping his eyes with a red handkerchief.

"Auntie Lallums is ill," Godfrey said swiftly to Ma.

"No!" Ma set the pudding down and stared straight before her.

"She's in a hospital. They want you to go."

"My little Lellie," wept Grumps.

Ma picked up the letter and read it. Then she helped the boys to pudding.

"I'm sorry I can't give you any money, Godfrey," she said. "I hope it's not a disappointment, old chap. But I've just got enough for Grumps's fare and my own. We shall have to go at once to the hospital. Can you be home early? I don't like leaving Felix too long alone."

"I shall be quite all right, Ma," cried Felix eagerly.

Godfrey nodded, his lips gravely pursed.

"I'll come home early. It doesn't matter about the money."

"My little Lellie," said Grumps, beginning now, however, to sup—or rather, as it seemed to the boys, to inhale—his soup. He groaned, and turned to Ma. "She's ill," he said, pathetically.

"Yes. Very ill. We must go at once to the hospital. You must hurry up with your soup," said Ma. She was so anxious that she was brusque, almost accusing.

Grumps put down his spoon, shaking his head slowly and slightly, as if he were trembling.

"I didn't know she was ill," he remarked, defensively as a poor old beggar might reply to a charge of trespass.

"We all knew she wasn't well," replied Ma. "She told us herself that she was over-worked and weary. This letter says that the man who wrote it has written to you before. He hasn't had an answer. He wrote to tell you she was ill. Asking you to tell me. Didn't you get a letter?"

Grumps passed his hand across his brow. He had a dazed look upon his face.

"I don't know," he said feebly, and began to fish in his pockets as one lost. "Ah've been so poorly, I cannot tell ye. . . . Wait a bit."

"We must go at once!" cried Ma. "Eat your dinner, and then, while I'm getting ready, be putting on your boots."

She rose from the table, to the accompaniment of an explosion of groans from Grumps. As she went out of the room Grumps began to eat his meat and potatoes and greens. Godfrey finished his pudding and left the table. Felix, who had also finished, began to gather together the plates and knives and forks. In doing this he kept an eye upon Grumps, who ate silently and with enjoyment.

Ma, returning in ten minutes, found Grumps stretched in the most comfortable chair, his hands folded, his eyes closed. He had made no preparation to go out, and when Ma spoke to him he groaned faintly. She repeated her exhortation. Grumps, opening his eyes for an instant, and then closing them, repeated his groan. It was clear to Ma that Grumps did not feel very much inclined to leave the house. She paused, too humane to insist, half-hesitating, but not convinced. She was too delicate in mind to conceive the reality. But Felix came close to her and whispered. It was impossible for Grumps to deceive his younger grandson, however he might succeed with Ma.

"He's only pretending, Ma," said Felix. And then, very loudly: "Come on, Grumps! Time to go. Here's your boots!" He drew the elastic-sided boots from their resting-place, and pulled Pa's slippers from Grumps's comfortable feet. As he did so, Felix looked up, to catch from one open eye a look of such malignant hostility from Grumps that he redoubled his efforts. Grumps left the house with Ma, less than twenty minutes later. Thus was it shown that if youth but knows, age can do nothing at all in the inevitable encounter. Felix was alone in the house, singing to maintain his spirits, and engaged in very carefully washing up the dishes which had been used for the family mid-day meal. He was very lonely, but his was the loneliness of victory.

iv

At this time Felix had just passed through his religious phase. How it came, I do not know; but it never recurred, although Felix remained a Christian until he was one-and-twenty. Within the last three months, during which he had been going out more freely, he had made an

experiment with the local church choir. He had been to one or two choir-practices. Unfortunately, however, his argumentative disposition and quick temper had led to a public debate with the Rector; and Felix had refused to complete his probationary period. Instead, he preached in the big front bedroom from a little home-made desk which stood upon a sugar-box, and did much to convert the invaluable Tippetty-Witchet to Christianity. His texts were taken from a small and damaged New Testament, and he expounded them with fervour and eloquence. Tip, now an elderly (if frivolous) cat, never yawned, even behind a paw, and followed with interest the brandishings of Felix's hortatory arm; although he sometimes left the church before the close of the sermon and sauntered down to the kitchen, hankering, no doubt, as Mr. William le Queux would say, after the fleshpots of Egypt.

Felix had also started a domestic newspaper, and had just begun—it was not yet a regular habit, which it afterwards became—to accompany the milkman upon his rounds. He stood upon these occasions beside the big can amid the smell of milk and the counter-smell arising sweetly from the body of Tom, the milkman's pony. Nothing more like a chariot than a milkman's cart can be conceived. As a consequence of this association with milk there had appeared in his newspaper—in addition to a study of Cats—a series of articles, practical and expert, profoundly illuminating the problem of "How to Tell a Good Milkman."

In emulation of Godfrey, who had bought a small butterfly net and who sometimes talked learnedly of Entomology and Lepidoptera, Felix had tried to cultivate silkworms; but apart from a profusion of mulberry leaves and cardboard boxes of cocoons, little wisps of golden silk, and a few disgustingly pale caterpillars which quickly died, he saw nothing in the pursuit, which accordingly

he abandoned. It might be a pastime for princesses, he thought, but it would never do for himself, because it was both boring and revolting. He burned the boxes and the leaves, and fell into his still-continuing complete ignorance of the insect world.

One other game Felix had, and this he played with another little boy who lived in the road, and with the little boy's sister. It was a game gathered round the bowling of hoops, iron or wooden, managed with stick or skimmer; and it was diversified by nautical pretence. The journeys taken from the base to various points in roads near by were converted into journeys to such countries as Spain, Japan, Canada; with the result that cargoes were taken to these distant places, and other cargoes brought back to England, which was a square patch of pavement beside the doctor's stables. The mariners would describe their voyages, and the vessels they had sighted; and in accordance with seafaring tradition the narratives were occasionally rather incredible. In the intervals of voyaging, Felix and his friends watched the doctor's coachman grooming his horse and cleaning his carriage. They crowded to the gate in order to hear the coachman hiss, either so as to soothe the horse or so as to keep flying dust from his own mouth. Which was the true reason Felix never knew, but he always hissed in brushing his own clothes, as a measure of precaution.

As he finished drying the dishes, and while he was arranging them in their places upon the dresser, Felix thought longingly of the lovely brightness out of doors, and wished very much that he could go out into the sunshine and the warmth. He had the most beautiful reveries in hot summer days, looking up through the leaves, and listening to the stealthy music of the quiet lanes. He was a little nervous at being left alone in the house, although he had promised not to be, and although he knew Godfrey

would be home in another two hours. The time was very long. He felt rather miserable. Even Halma politics lost some of their savour when one knew that Ma was nowhere in the house. Felix missed her more each minute. He seemed to become a very little boy indeed for a time, although he put his hands in his pockets and whistled loudly and made Mr. Felix Hunter deliver a lecture upon the spiritual life to the entire population of Halmaland.

Hours before Godfrey came home! Felix thought of Grumps not wanting to go back to London, wanting to stay all night and every night. He had no pity for Grumps. He had no pity for any old people. He did not know what they felt, and if he did not love them he was unable to pretend in his heart that he did. He did not love Grumps because Grumps offended his fastidiousness. Also, he was always over-sensitive to deceitfulness in others, and the histrionics of such as Grumps, which moved him to impatient scorn. Without noticing exactly what he was doing, Felix had taken a piece of paper and pencil, and was drawing Grumps as he had looked sitting in the comfortable chair with his eyes closed and his hands folded. When he had done that, Felix tried to draw Ma, and then Godfrey, and then a picture of a lane with trees, and the sun speckling the ground. The first was a caricature, the second and third were sober efforts, the fourth was an attempt to give objective reality to a vision. He did not feel satisfied with the portraits of Ma and Godfrey; and the drawing of the lane was so difficult, so impossible to be done, that Felix lost all sense of time, at first working patiently, and then impatiently spoiling what he had drawn; and he was still busy with his pencil when Godfrey came home from afternoon school to tea.

v

"You'd better go to bed, Felix. I shall go as soon as Pa comes home."

It was after eight o'clock, and the summer darkness was falling. Felix had yawned once or twice while Godfrey did his home-lessons, but he was now becoming really sleepy. He shook his head, however.

"No, I'll wait up till Ma comes home," he said, resolutely.

"Just as you like." Godfrey spoke coldly, and he was frowning.

How funny old Godfrey was, thought Felix, not at all impressed by his brother's dignity. It was always, he thought, as if Godfrey were pretending that he was really somebody else, and not Godfrey at all. He was what Felix called "thin-skinned." He did not want to talk or play with Felix nowadays as he had been in the habit of doing two years before. He was growing up, and he had friends of his own age, with whom he had great games. The other boys used to take the go-cart which had been bought for Felix to some unkempt woods in the neighbourhood. They went through a paling into these dark and mysterious woods, and scattered. Some of them lurked in the bushes, lying face downward in the mould, among ancient twigs and the powdered leaves of many years, while others pretended to be in charge of the mail-coach. The coach was galloped through the woods, and suddenly, upon every side from among the bushes, would arise determined and cudgel-armed desperadoes. "Bail Up!" was their blood-curdling cry. . . . Felix had once been allowed to go with these other boys, and he had seen the delights for himself; but the sense of being a sickly little boy who could take no part in their game had chilled him.

"I wonder if I shall ever be strong again," he thought. "Strong and . . . brave. Not . . . nervous."

He was thinking of this, curled in an armchair; and when Godfrey lighted a lamp and drew the curtains Felix began to adore the misty corners of the room, and the silence, which was not frightening, because he had Godfrey's company. The walls were covered with a paper of one tone, a sort of warm blue that became luminous in this light and as unfathomable as the sky. Felix looked at the blue, and his brain was haunted with sweet phantoms, with a vague loveliness that made him smile and dream. Still smiling, he dropped asleep. A long time passed, and Felix slept on. Godfrey, noticing his slumber and the creeping chill of the evening, brought an overcoat and gently folded it about Felix to keep him warm. Pa came home. After an explanation of Ma's absence, and then a strained silence between the two, Godfrey said "Good-night" and went to bed. Still Felix slept on, until it seemed the middle of the night, when he awoke.

The lamp was still there, shaded from his eyes, and Pa was walking about the room, speaking to himself. At least, Felix supposed that this was so, for he saw nobody else; and having moved slightly, still half-asleep, with heavy lids dropping, he heard what Pa said. It was at first with little attention, but when Pa swore, not once but many times, Felix lifted his impish face above the overcoat and solemnly regarded his father.

"Damn . . . damn . . ." said Malcolm Hunter.

"Damn . . . day after day . . . ?" He moved restlessly about the room, steady but not quite steady, catching a chair now and then in his progress. He now wore the coat part of that brown, black-ruled ulster which Grumps had owned in the days of High Field, and the tails were vagrant. To Felix he never seemed to take this off, but to live within its folds, with a greenish black felt hat upon

his head, in shape something between a bowler and a top-per. "Cold . . . superior . . ." said Pa . . . "Arrogant—as if I were something alien, beneath contempt. Something. . . . Damn. As if I wasn't his father." There was another pause, during which Pa seemed either to listen or to ponder this disregard of relationship. "Yes, his *father*. The damned impudence! I won't be treated as outcast by my own flesh and blood! He comes and goes . . . that supercilious air. . . . Temper. Haha! If he doesn't like it, let him . . ." There was here a silence, and Pa pulled back a chair and sat down in it, moving out of his way upon the table, with a sweep of his arm, a bag of apples which he had brought home. He seemed to brood, staring straight in front of him, and mouthing. "I suppose he costs. . . . His food, his clothes . . . overcoat. It's the last damned overcoat he gets from me. The last!" Pa again laughed scornfully to himself. "I'm sick and tired of the whole affair. Yes, the last overcoat. Damn. . . ." For a while his voice ceased, as he sat gloomily by the table, hitting it from moment to moment. At last he resumed, more energetically than ever: "Nothing but work. And he does *nothing*. Nothing. No idea of doing anything. I'm privileged to support him. He looks to me for every penny—every stitch! At his age. Damn. . . ." He was obviously moving himself to anger, was spurring his irritation until it became raw and ungovernable. His oaths grew more explosive, and went outside the range of Felix's comprehension. "At his age I was working. I *had* to work. Not playing with a lot of fools . . . sponging . . . Education!" Pa laughed a third time. "Education! The last damned overcoat he gets from me! The last damned

"Oh, Pa," cried Felix, laughing uncontrollably. "*Don't* say it again. It sounds so silly!"

Pa stopped suddenly, and stared at Felix. It was an instant before he replied.

"I thought it was Ma!" he said, confused, explaining his bewildered slowness in identifying the voice of a son. "What are you doing awake at this time?" But his face was changed. He was embarrassed, almost stuttering. He even reddened faintly, at the thought of what Felix might have heard him say. He came and looked down at his son with glassy eyes, his mouth self-conscious, like Godfrey's.

"You met a friend, didn't you?" asked Felix, alluding boldly to Pa's state. It was a technical term, unfortunately familiar.

"Why aren't you in bed?" demanded Pa, disdaining to answer the criticism.

"Waiting for Ma. I'm not going until she comes, so you needn't think it. I tell you what, Pa," said Felix. "I'll play you a game at cribbage. I'm wide awake. Will you?"

He threw aside the overcoat, and leapt to the place where stood the card box instantly convertible into a cribbage board. Pa obediently sat down, overwhelmed by superior generalship, and dealt the cards; but his hands were unsteady. They were not unsteady altogether as the result of what Pa had drunk, but from that as well as his recent anger. He was ashamed under Felix's eye, which saw everything. His shame at first ruffled him still more, but the gurgle of laughter which Felix always gave at scoring either "one for his nob" or "two for his heels" was so disarming that Pa gradually recovered composure, good temper, complaisance. He, too, began to grin; a broad grin which showed his teeth and drew down the corners of his mouth. He could not resist Felix. They ate apples together, and Pa smoked his pipe. And fortunately enough it was not until this mood of sub-

jection to a master spirit had been reached that Ma arrived home, spent, hopeless, very unequal for this occasion to the encounter of further cause for unhappiness.

"She's dying. They wouldn't let us see her," explained Ma very quietly to her husband, while the others helped her off with her light overcoat and hat. "We waited and waited in case they sent out any message; and at last I felt that I must come home and go again in the morning."

Ma was quite tearless, but there was pain in her voice as well as weariness, for Auntie Lallums had been much loved, and if she had for an instant relaxed self-control Ma must have cried. She was too absorbed in the bad news to notice Pa's eyes, and when he put his clumsy arm about her for a minute she was happy in the caress. And then, seeing how worn she was, Felix ran to the bedroom for her slippers while Pa brought some beer and some bread and cheese. The three sat down again until a clock struck midnight and Ma cried "Mercy! Twelve!" and Felix was sent hurriedly upstairs to bed. And as Pa and Ma remained talking of Auntie Lallums, Pa rose and began walking about the room through inability any longer to bear stillness.

"It's dreadful," he said. "Dreadful. And we seem always to have this sort of thing, year after year. With no peace or recompense."

"There *are* recompenses," said Ma, slowly.

Pa turned and looked at her.

"Well, I don't regard myself as one—for you," he said, with difficulty. He was deeply moved. Into his muddled head there started a memory, the memory of an old-time dream. Ma answered:

"Don't you? And then. . . . Well, there are the boys. And, for example, this."

She had pushed aside the half-empty bag of apples, re-

vealing the drawings made by Felix earlier in the day. The two bent over them, standing side by side.

"The one of Grumps is good," said Pa. "Whose are they? Godfrey's or . . ."

For answer, she pointed to the sketch of Godfrey.

"They're *all* good, in their way," said Ma. "Just imagine—ten! I think he'll be an artist." Swiftly she envisaged Felix as attaining her own ambition. "And Godfrey . . ."

"And what, Godfrey?" asked Pa, his face clouding.

"I'm afraid there's no doubt about the profession for Godfrey," was the answer. "You've only to see him come into a room."

CHAPTER V: THE DEPTHS

i

ANOTHER year of life saw the Hunters in another home. Not desire but necessity drove them nearer London. In one of the ugly main thoroughfares of Holloway they had a melancholy flat upon a first floor. Above them, with his grown-up daughters, lived a man who worked in a restaurant; below, a lady so aristocratically languid in manner that her dropped and misplaced aitches came as a surprise.

"Hai'm so delicate," she would say, stressing the "cate." "Mai constichution's weak. But ai'm *most* select as to who I assoshiate with." And she would hold her elbows with both hands, looking pale to death, and not quite sane. This lady's husband, who lived in the flat with her and with their half-witted children, never appeared and was never thought of by his neighbours. Mrs. Taylor was so extraordinary, and her children were so exactly like her in appearance and so mentally ineffective, that to an enthusiast Mrs. Taylor might have been supposed to have solved the problem of self-fertilization.

The Hunters lived between the two families. They could hear the Snappers tramping up the bare wooden stairs and about the oilcloth-covered rooms overhead; they could hear the weeping of the half-witted children of Mr. and Mrs. Taylor from the garden and back rooms of the ground-floor flat. Consequently they were never dull. On the contrary, their excitements were innumerable and unending. The rent they paid (or did not pay)

was nine shillings a week. Omnibuses passed the door. Shops stood opposite—a second-hand furniture dealer, a grocer, a dairy, and a sweetstuff shop—all, excepting the grocer's, so sparsely arrayed that the owners seemed to be merely in temporary occupation. There was incessantly a loud noise from traffic in the Flemington Road. To the Hunters, coming from the peace of Brenton, it was deafening. They had forgotten old experience. And the rooms were bleak squares of space, enclosed by walls and doors of dreary, faded, yellowish-brown. The windows, which admitted little light owing to the taller buildings around, were of the kind which create optical illusion. One saw through them, in the street below, the strangest malformed people that ever lived.

Tippetty-Witchet had been brought from Brenton in a basket, and he did in fact live the remainder of his life in this flat as he had lived in Palmerston Buildings and Farringdon Road. He accommodated himself to his homes like some old maidservant who has been in the family for generations, and never showed any of the supposed instinct of cats to return to former addresses. But Tip now was a very aged cat indeed. His whiskers were thin and his hair rusty. His backbone was like a ridge from which the rest of his body limply depended. He had sometimes a pathetic—and in the circumstances excusable—air of shaking his head over the fortunes of the Hunter family. Over 266A Flemington Road he might have gone farther, and howled; but he only sniffed cautiously round all the rooms, creeping along with his stomach near the ground, and at last sitting dismally upon a corner of a carpet which had been slightly unrolled as it was thrown down.

The first sight of this gloomy flat, with their furniture making a succession of forlorn heaps little adequate to the task of concealing its bareness, turned the heart of

Felix to ice. It was five years since they had been in surroundings which in themselves held so much discouragement.

"We can't live *here!*" he cried in desperation. His repugnance was physical.

"It'll be better. We'll make it better!" urged Ma, with equal desperation. "Cheer up, old chap. It's just the horrid untidiness of the move. Help me with the table, so that the carpet can go down . . ." She was energetic, because it was a mother's duty to rally the spirits of her children in adversity; but her own heart was sinking, as the bravado showed. "We'll make it look a little better by the time Pa comes back. Godfrey: you light the fire, will you? There's coal and wood in that long scuttle. I think matches with the string in that ornament . . . I wish I could find the curtains."

"It's like a grave," murmured Felix, with unhappy eyes and lowered head. But he helped his mother. It was to his research, in fact, that they owed the curtains, which were whisked into position in a trice. The discovery shrouded the windows, at any rate, and did something to create the impression that this was a home. And with a carpet roughly laid, and the table in place, there was a real improvement.

They heard amid all this racing effort a piano being vamped upstairs by somebody whose skill was less than his rhythmic sense. Godfrey, momentarily abandoning his search for firewood among the pieces of coal, struck an attitude, kneeling upon the floor.

"If music be the food of love," he cried, "play on!
Give me excess of it, that surfeiting—"

He dived again into the coal-scuttle, and as he laid and lighted the fire beat time with the poker, until he crashed

it against the side of the grate and became silent with panic.

Pa, who had been out marketing, now appeared, his face rounder and larger than ever, and his head proportionately smaller. He was obviously ill and oppressed, but his manner had a kind of forced buoyancy such as is assumed by those who do not joke naturally. There was a thin, unconvinced sturdiness in his tone. He was laden with paper bags and small parcels.

"Boys!" said Pa, in what he conceived to be the rapt voice of one who has seen Paradise. "This is the place for us all. It's glorious. There's a ham-and-beef shop round the corner that is better than anything I've ever known. Men who call out 'piggy, wiggy, pork!' Big steaming trays of faggots and saveloys! Crowds of people waiting for roast pork and boiled pork, with pease pudding! Boiled beef with carrots and dumplings! And sublime trotters and pickled pork! Men in white coats and aprons, with long knives. It's an ideal shop. We shall do well here. Come along, Ma! If there's no tablecloth, let's have a newspaper. Eat it while it's hot."

He was jubilant. He had been born in the City of London, and he loved it. All the noise of a Saturday evening market had been happiness to him. For a moment he had forgotten troubles and had embraced a new life. The rivalry of butchers, the kerbstone stalls with flaring lights, the ghastly faces of men and women loitering at those stalls, the sharpening of knives, the cries, the press—were all so much what he had known as an untroubled boy that he seemed to feel new ichor running in his veins. Smacking his hands he helped with the table, threw over it a sheet of newspaper, laid out plates and knives and forks, triumphantly found a cruet, and a loaf, and prepared to relish the meal.

The others, infected in their varying degrees, joined

him. Ma, who was weary, was thankful for rest and change: Godfrey, who was caught up by the exhilaration of the moment, and also by the success of his crackling fire, had an ardent wish to see these same splendours. Only Felix, grinning, was still grave. He grinned, but he was troubled. The flat was the most horrible place he had ever been in. And Ma knew his whole heart.

ii

She always knew his heart, because her knowledge of Felix was built upon love. He had but to come into the room and she was immediately sensitive to his recent experience. That was so in respect of the others, as well; but as Felix had fewer moods, or perhaps was only less ready to abandon himself to them, he was less easy to read than Pa and Godfrey. There was very little Ma did not know about her family. In a way they were all her children. They none of them thought of her as a child, because she made no claims upon them; but she had her reward in the strength of her vicarious experience and in their thoughtless recognition of her devoted understanding.

When Pa was ill-tempered, she diverted his interest; when Godfrey was difficult she was still the only one to understand his proud and sensitive heart; and when Felix was in a rage she could not quite remain serious. She was never so serious that she could not make nonsense for them all. And for Felix she was still what she had been since the lamented defection of Godfrey, his best friend. It was thus, even in this tragic moment, a cheerful party, held together wholly by a single personality.

A few days later, when Felix had gone to school for the first time for four years, and when Godfrey, who by his father's wish had been apprenticed without premium

and of course without salary to a firm of lithographers at Dalston, had set out, for the first time in his life, the party was dispersed. Ma was left alone in the flat, with heavy tasks and willing hands to perform them. And every night the family would reassemble, and resume its curious battle of whim and sensitiveness, so fascinating if one could but watch it, so unmanageable if one were engaged in the battle. Unless, of course, one were Ma.

Godfrey tramped off to Dalston in the early morning, and Felix, full of trepidation, found his way to the school which he was to attend. It was a small private school, consisting of two shabby houses standing together in bare gardens, and appeared to educate only one group of boys. It had been chosen because of the long absence of Felix from any other school, which had made him abnormally intelligent but ill-informed. It did nothing to alter this state. Felix remains abnormally intelligent and abnormally ill-informed to this day.

As he entered by way of the open iron gate before these two houses, and looked up at the shabby gilt board which announced the name of the school and its principal, Felix was so impressed that he almost ran away. He walked out of the gate again, and looked up and down the road. "Golly!" he said. Then he felt that the humiliation of failure would be worse than the terrors of endurance, and at a smart pace he entered the house. In front of him was a door with a piece of paper fastened to it by a drawing-pin; and on the paper was the word "OFFICE." He knocked and entered, taking his cap off, like a polite little boy.

The first stage of the ordeal was reassuring. A pretty young woman sat there, with red hair and blue eyes; and Felix was instantly made happy at the sight of something pretty. In addition, the young woman, who saw before her an extremely neat little boy with a good deal of curly,

reddish hair and well-arched eyebrows and humorous eyes, gave him her attention at once.

"I've come to the school, please. My mother arranged for me to come. My name's Felix Hunter," said this little boy.

"Hasn't she come with you?" asked Miss Burnish.

"She couldn't," explained Felix. "Besides, I'm nearly twelve."

Miss Burnish smiled. Then she went away, and brought back with her a tall thin man in a frock-coat, who looked so careworn and spoke in such a friendly and familiar way that Felix could not realise that he was the head-master of the school. Felix did not yet grasp the fact that this school had arisen from the classes of a teacher of the pianoforte, and that this teacher was the tall man. He listened respectfully to some conversation which he did not understand. It was in relation to the terms—which did the master great credit, and which, as it turned out, were to do him yet greater credit—upon which Felix was being received into the school. He was given a pile of school-books and some exercise-books, and the tall man led him upstairs to a class-room.

Here was a fine heart-beating experience! The wide shallow stairs of the old house, uncarpeted and crumbling to ruin, led up to a large landing. A big door was opened, and a murmur which Felix had heard in ascending the stairs became a human voice in action. He followed the tall man through the doorway, breathless, clutching his slithery scratching lesson books. The room in which they stood was an ordinary first-floor back-bedroom of no great size, but the walls were distempered and inkstained, and upon one of them hung a big varnished map. The map, he found later, was for ornament only: it was never used in class. By the fireplace, in the grate of which dimly burned a coke fire, a big blackboard stood upon an

easel. And then Felix began to feel hot all over, and to feel his clean new undervest tickling his back; for the human voice was that of a master in a black gown, and with him were about twenty boys. And the boys all looked at Felix while he was introduced to the master, and his cheeks grew redder and hotter and then suddenly quite cold. He was thankful when he was bidden to sit down at the end of a desk standing near to him against the wall. The lesson proceeded. Felix, after some furtive peeps which convinced him that he was no longer being examined, looked round at the room and at those who filled it. The master was a weak, kindly, fair man who could not control the class. The boys were of all sizes, some of them well-dressed, some of them untidy. Some had their collars outside their coats, and some had them inside. One had a wizened face, like that of a monkey; and was the oldest boy in the room. He was seventeen. Others were overgrown, lanky fellows. Some appeared to be smaller and younger than Felix. All sat together, as if in the same class; but there was a difference in the nature of their work which he could not discover. The next boy to Felix was about fifteen, and Felix thought he had the pleasantest face of any. He was a dark boy, very serious. Felix liked him.

"I shall now dictate," said the master, as if in resumption of a theme interrupted by the tall man's arrival. "Hunter: you may as well begin with this, you have your books."

Felix smiled, laid out his new possessions . . .

"Does it matter which exercise-book I use?" he whispered to his pleasant-looking neighbour. To his surprise, the other boy looked annoyed.

"Go away. You smell," he answered.

The tears sprang suddenly into Felix's eyes, so unexpected was this rebuff. He made no attempt to speak

again, but dipped his pen into the ink, opening the first book that his hand touched. But for the next few minutes he could hear nothing, so fast was his heart beating, so wounded, so filled with terrible bewildered pain was he.

"I hadn't hurt him. I hadn't hurt him," whispered Felix to himself in anguish. "What had I done to him?" He had never previously come into personal contact with harshness; and the blow was intolerable. Then the ghastly thought came to him: *did* he smell unpleasant, as the boy had said? For an instant humour deserted Felix. The desire that everything should end, should dissolve into nothingness, was vehement. It was the prayer for annihilation that all sensitive persons make. He felt as though he were throbbing all over. He was just a nervous little boy in school for the first time for four years. It *couldn't* be true! But *why* be so brutal? This distress brought him to the verge of weeping. Then his face began to burn. Anger succeeded to dismay; and scorn to both. He again dipped his pen; and at last, in the middle of a sentence, he began to write from the master's dictation. Pride had rescued him from shame for the second time that morning.

iii

The weak, fair master, Mr. Onslow, was not the only one who taught the boys. There were two others. The first of these was an extremely capable and likeable Jew, Oldenberg by name, who smacked the boys on the heads with a book, was small and active and authoritative, and who therefore taught them something. He would interest the boys by showing them the relations of things, which the other masters, even if they were aware of them, had not the interest to do. It was Mr. Oldenberg who brought spirit into the lessons, and curiosity into the minds of a

very average set of boys. The third master was a big, loose-limbed man who acted as a substitute when one of the two regular masters was away, and who punished naughty boys by inscribing their names upon the black-board. When he spelt the names wrongly there was much laughter.

Nobody was ever caned at this school: the risk of losing punished pupils would have been too great. Mr. Oldenberg, therefore, who never hesitated to knock heads together, and whose eyes were always alert for passing notes, sly kicks, small thefts and scuffles, was the only master who could compel obedience. Mr. Onslow would face a tumult offended and pink, swallowing quickly, his Adam's apple going up and down like a monkey on a stick. Mr. Cox, the substitute master, made no attempt to manage the boys. He merely beamed upon them and, when the riot subsided, continued his desultory efforts to teach them.

From Mr. Cox Felix received the only lesson he ever had in the intricacies of English grammar. It was not very successful. Felix, who to this day is an illiterate, listened respectfully to a series of disjointed remarks of which he could make nothing whatever; and Mr. Cox's own confidence in these remarks seemed a little to diminish. He abruptly discontinued them. Instead, he began to ask questions. And his first question—or rather, its sequel—created in Felix such disturbance that for the rest of the lesson all was unintelligible.

"What," asked Mr. Cox, "is Etymology?"

Nobody answered. All the boys looked bashfully down at their desks. Felix felt his heart give a bound. Surely that was a word often used in the past by Godfrey? He ventured.

"The science of butterflies and moths," said Felix.

Mr. Cox made no reply.

iv

Felix went to this school, at intervals, for two years. He did not go regularly, or indeed much more often than once a week, because he was almost constantly ill. But he came to know most of the boys, and to learn that the charge of personal offensiveness was a common insult, not to be taken literally. Most of the boys had a good deal of sexual sewage in their minds, but in general were equally preoccupied with other natural functions of the body. They asked Felix to their homes; and he could not ask them back to his because it was in a slum. Their fathers were prosperous men, and his was poor. They had many clothes; he had only those he wore every day. Their school fees were paid; his were not. He was ill, ashamed, and starving. They were healthy little monsters, with the exception of the wizened-faced boy, the son of an old evil-liver, who collected indecent photographs, tried to smoke in class, and was cheerfully and rather likeably vicious.

The boys played football and cricket in the back garden of the house. And it was here for the first time that Felix, when he was well, tasted the joys of football. He did not play it expertly; he was erratic, and his strength was inadequate. But he kicked and charged with a ferocity which was amazing. He played as though life itself was at stake. As a result, among boys of his own age, he was regarded as a good footballer, simply because the fierce nervous energy of Grumps and Ma had descended to him. When one of the masters called him in class "a budding G. O. Smith" he felt so proud that he could hardly sit still. It was the highest compliment he had ever received.

And although Felix learned very little in the way of lessons at this school, he made his first real friend. One

morning, in the playground, he noticed a new boy of about his own age standing alone, and the solitude of this boy, and his pleasant round face, led Felix to go up and speak.

"You're new, aren't you? I thought you were," he said. "I say, do you write or draw?"

The words were a sufficient introduction, for the new boy was brisk and quite ready to make friends; and so they left school together that day, and continued to be companions until their ways in life began to diverge. The boys roamed Finsbury Park, listening to the old codgers who sat and talked politics, watching Saturday afternoon cricket matches, talking, following girls and waving to them, but never arriving at the state of courage necessary for bold assault. They started a little school magazine which they wrote and illustrated themselves, and printed by means of gelatine sheets. For Felix the friendship was delightful. It helped him to live. He never told Jack Howell where he lived, or anything about his home; and if he noticed them Jack was too much of a gentleman to say anything about Felix's broken boots and shabby clothes. They had other friends, but these were comrades only, and not, as it were, fellow masons. One of the boys said once:

"Felix *is* a funny chap. He laughs; but if you look at his eyes *they* aren't laughing. You notice!"

There was something curious about Felix's eyes. They saw into distances. They showed how much loveliness Felix knew; and indeed at this time he knew nothing base.

v

Jack Howell and Felix sat next to one another in class, and Jack had a toy which gave them both inexpressible pleasure. It was a link in a bicycle chain, and could be

made to sit up beside their common ink-well like a little Buddha. The link was so contrived that the inmost portion could serve as a head, the two portions next it as a pair of arms, and the outer portions as a pair of legs. It could stand, when propped against a book, or sit down (which was its favourite position); and Jack and Felix would sing little songs under their breath to their pet. The other boys were envious, but could not for long retain it by stealing, and as Joko was never confiscated he remained engrossing to the end.

But when Felix had been at the school for about a year a prospect opened before him which, from great brightness, ended at length in characteristic disaster. A scheme was set afoot to make the boys work in competition. A scholarship was mentioned. It was to involve a year's free tuition. Now Felix perfectly recognised the value of such a thing to Pa and Ma. Even if his remittances to the head-master were unsatisfactorily occasional, they were at the same time a strain upon a purse which rarely held half-crowns. But something other than the economic spectre seized Felix's imagination; something that was to stir him at intervals all through his life to uncalculated and incalculable energy. It was an emotion, a sudden will, which arose and disappeared most inexplicably. He therefore made up his mind that no ill-health should keep him from school during the period of the important examinations. He was in his place punctually every day.

And he worked! He tried his hardest. The whole school was excited and pleased, and did the same. As each subject was marked by the masters the results were read aloud; and during these announcements there was no want of discipline. The first, dictation, was adjudged. Mr. Onslow read aloud in order the names of the scholars and the marks they had obtained. He cleared his clock-work throat. "Hunter, one hundred; Smith, seventy-

five; Reeves, seventy," he read. And upon the next day, with the subject English Composition, he read "Hunter, one hundred; Reeves, eighty-five; Smith, seventy." Felix set his teeth. He had expected this. But he expected now to fail in his weak subjects, Arithmetic and Algebra.

To his astonishment, he did not fail in these subjects. His average was reduced, certainly, but in each subject he had earned over eighty marks. What subjects were to follow? He looked down the list with a dubious glance; but something equivalent to a shrug followed. Was he not Felix Hunter, and had not a star danced at his birth? For drawing and cartography he again received full marks in each case. For Latin he was still, with eighty marks, superior to his competitors. Reeves and Smith, both older boys than himself, were not making any appreciable headway. The one was a clever-looking boy who probably lacked Felix's brilliance; the other was an unmistakable plodder. It was a most exciting struggle. Geography, History, Euclid—it appeared to Felix that in these cases also some miraculous aid was vouchsafed him. The star might have been seen dancing in his eye. And then, near the end of the examination, came French. . . .

Felix and Jack, as I have said, sat next to one another, with Joko as a mascot between them. And Jack had some slight trouble with his French questions. His interests were practical rather than linguistic. He wriggled slightly from time to time, while Felix, breathing hard, wrote and paused and wrote again. Presently Felix saw from the corner of his eye that a piece of blotting-paper had been pushed by Jack towards him. "What's August?" he read. He wrote "Aôut," and resumed his work. In five minutes the blotting-paper was back again. Jack had been posed by certain phrases in a piece of English which was to be translated into French. Felix read:

"What's for 'If I had known'?" He could not help replying, "Top marks." . . . But before Jack could ascertain what was the reply to his question, there came a terrible interruption.

"Pass up that piece of blotting-paper, Hunter!" thundered Mr. Onslow.

Felix flushed scarlet. No criminal could have looked as clearly detected in crime as he. As if he were saying, as in all English police accounts criminals invariably say, "It's a fair cop, mister," he passed the blotting-paper to Mr. Onslow. His heart was beating at a gallop. He smiled reassuringly at Jack, but it was pride that made him smile. The probable consequences of the discovery were immediately apparent; although Felix hoped that the slightness of the communications—and even possibly his own witticism—might save him.

"You two boys—Hunter and Howell—will stay behind. Pass in your papers now."

They passed in their papers, not looking at one another. In this subject at least Felix guessed that his marks would be halved, as indeed proved to be the case. He fell to fifth place in French.

At the beginning of the week after, the head-master came into the class-room. He beamed upon the boys in a rather gloomy fashion, which he could in no way overcome. The strain of running a school and a college for evening classes in commercial education, music, and art was too great for him; and he was often at his wits' end for money. No wonder he was careworn. No wonder his beaming face lacked true heartiness. The genuine feeling was there; but it was overwhelmed by anxieties.

"Now, boys," he said, "I've got the scholarship results here. Who do you suppose has won?"

"Hunter!" shouted everybody except Felix. He was

too breathless to shout. And with the head-master's next words his heart was in his stomach.

"No. Hunter is third. The scholarship is won by Reeves."

It was over. Disaster had arrived.

vi

Grumps used to come sometimes to the flat, and lie groaning or sleeping upon the big bed, covered with his own grey overcoat. He had no money, and lived only upon what he could pick up. Godfrey, being an apprentice, was earning no money. Pa was earning no money—or so little that it was almost as if he earned none. In the cold weather Felix used often to stay in bed because there was no fire, and even if he arose would kneel shivering and sick in his old overcoat, playing mechanically with his Halmas until he could bear to do so no longer because his head ached so. He suffered much from the lack of food, for it induced frightening visions in sleep, of strange changing shapes impossible to be described, which advanced and receded, grew and became small, in a terrifying silence like that of gaping fish in an aquarium. He had also dreams of the launching of war canoes by the South Sea islanders over the bodies of their living captives. This picture he had certainly derived from a vivid and horrible passage in R. M. Ballantyne's boys' book, "The Coral Island"; but the prime cause of all Felix's ills was mental anæmia, due to slow starvation. He grew steadily weaker, and his power of resistance diminished month by month until he was sometimes afraid to go to bed for fear of these groping nothingnesses which came as soon as he closed his eyes. If they had a few pence the Hunters would dine upon soup and a big currant pudding. If they had no food they dined upon their

spirits. But Pa grew whiter and thinner, and Godfrey grew taller and thinner and more silent. And Felix had more and more severe headaches which rendered him half-insensible, and he could not go to school because he was so feeble and so ill. What they would have done without Ma I do not know; and Ma's power to endure is only explicable by knowledge of her love for them all.

One day there was no breakfast; and Pa and Godfrey, buttoning their coats tightly, had left the house unfed. Felix lay in bed. He was half-delirious, and those impalpable horrors which pressed upon him when he closed his eyes were worse than his open-eyed hunger and sense of misery. He was afraid and alone. From the visions, which pulsed with his blood, he had no escape but thought; and he was thinking in a very blurred way about all the horrors which the visions carried in their train; and the hours went by and he had not the energy to fight against the horrors or to escape them by getting up. He was fast sinking into lethargy which resembled insensibility when there occurred to his mind, striking through the muddle there, the thought: "If I lie in bed, and don't get up and wash myself and do something, I shall just go on getting more and more frightened, and go mad, and die. And Ma wouldn't like that! She'd be ill. Poor Ma! She'd be unhappy. I don't know *what* she'd do. Perhaps she'd die. . . . Awful! So I've just *got* to get up this instant and pull myself together. We've all got to pull ourselves together."

He sat up in bed. It was after eleven o'clock upon a murky, wretched autumnal day, and the plain ugly walls of the room threw back despondency upon whomsoever faced them. Felix knew, although he did not know where she had gone, that Ma was out. She had come into the room, and somewhere amid his dream of the shapeless shapes and gaping nothingnesses he had heard her voice,

which had been low, so as not to awaken him too thoroughly. He had seen her eyes of pity, and felt her hand upon his hot forehead. . . .

With a spring Felix threw himself from the bed to the floor, and danced a capering little dance to show his sense of freedom from horrors. He did not look out of the windows at the ugliness that lurked there, but ran to the scullery and drew some water, and sponged his body and washed his face, and dressed himself, combing his long hair straight down over his brow and trying to make his funny mouth look serious. Then, with a lively eye, in spite of strange empty feelings and aches within, he toured the flat. He found that in going out Ma had been forced to leave unmade the other beds as well as his own; and that her kitchen work had also been neglected. These omissions, so far from depressing him, heightened Felix's spirits, because they provided him with an outlet for his determined energy. He whistled. He sang. He sang "The Merriest Fellows Are We," from "The Gondoliers." And as he sang he seized a broom; and then, throwing that aside, he made all the beds, very carefully, going from side to side to smooth the sheets, and did the kitchen work, and felt happier. As Ma was out he could not leave the flat; but he made a vow that never again would he stay in bed because there was no fire or sit moping over his Halmas because he felt ill or wretched. Those things most stop. He was thirteen now, growing up; and he must be a man.

"It doesn't *do*," he said. "I've got to pull myself together."

And it was as if he dreamed, for into his ears came a voice saying, as one which announces a distinguished guest, "Mr. Felix Hunter." He heard a stir among people gathered together, signifying the attention and curiosity to which the announcement had given rise. In his

picture, he stepped forward. . . . It was only a revival of the ambition which one section of his Halma game continually fed; but for the first time this ambition was conceived as a goal for personal attainment, and it was no longer a piece of unthinking play. It was like a speck of light very far ahead, to which it was necessary that he should attain. It was not a poetic vision—that was a permanent thing in Felix's heart, and I believe remains there still:—it was a spur to action. The poetic vision required no palpable reward. It was mystical, and had relation only to a state of being.

Ma presently returned, with a big parcel. When she saw that her work was done she was so moved that she hugged Felix, and kissed his head.

"That *was* a good boy," she whispered. Felix, his head against her breast, felt that she trembled.

"Oh, nothing," he said in his lordly voice. "Nothing to what I *will* do!" He grinned at her. "But what's all this great 'normous parcel?"

"Well," explained his mother, as if she were describing a new dress which she had planned to make herself, "they're some *shirts*."

"For us!" exclaimed Felix. "Oh, hooray!"

She was forced to make it clear that they were shirts, already cut out, which she had undertaken to machine, button, and buttonhole. She had a dozen to make, and for making that dozen she was to receive one-and-nine-pence.

"Oh, but Ma! It's like books!" cried Felix. "It's like blind babies, and . . ."

"Well, it's *rather* like books," agreed Ma. "But just at the moment it's rather like having no dinner today. I tried to get paid beforehand."

"What beasts!" commented Felix, "not to trust you!"

There was no further discussion of that point; and at

twelve o'clock Felix set out to walk to Highbury, all along streets full of shops with food in them, while his own little stomach gnawed and rumbled almost more than he could bear in cheerfulness. At Highbury he watched the tramcars turning the corners, and saw the conductors run, holding their money bags for safety close against their thighs, to change the points in the tramlines. It was exhilarating. Some of the trams turned round to jolt along New North Road, and these were a chocolate colour; others, of different colours, went down the Upper Street, Islington. Those were the days of horse-trams. Men stood about idly in the yard of Highbury Station opposite; loiterers waited for omnibuses; and the whole spot was the scene of a busy coming and going of human beings and vehicles so full of interest that Felix forgot all about Pa and about his stomach. He was rapt in contemplation of life, and moved by its inexhaustible variety of appeal to his senses.

And then he saw the old overcoat and the greenish hat, and Pa's broad face, and leapt forward, no longer in a dream, but eagerly welcoming. His painfully thin hands were raised, his face was full of alertness.

"Hullo, Mahlcolm!" he ejaculated, imitating Grumps. "Top o' the class?"

Pa looked down upon Felix with that familiar and chillingly awkward inability to express emotion, pressing his shoulder. And then, a little way down Ball's Pond Road, to which they turned because it was not considered meet that any passing of money should be public, Pa stopped.

"I got two-and-ninepence," he said. "Here's two-and-six."

"Oh, won't you take more!" cried Felix.

"I expect I'll get some." Pa was reassuring, and short.

He took satisfaction in yielding up so great a proportion of his fund.

"Have you had something to eat?"

"Yes. Some bread-and-cheese and beer. I was stood. That's why I'm a bit late. Now, hurry on to meet Godfrey. As fast as you can, or he'll be gone. And then back to Ma. Give Godfrey sixpence of that. . . ." He gave Felix a little friendly push, and a few seconds later was just a tall gaunt figure in the distant press of people, his coat-tails flowing, and his hat slightly cocked. Felix, after a single peep, ran down through side streets of big solemn houses until he came to Mildmay Road. Afar, he saw a thin, shabby figure with bowed shoulders and a face which hunger had lowered to greyness.

"Hey, Godfrey!" he called, at the top of his capacious voice.

Godfrey, who was just turning away from the trysting place hungry and dispirited, wheeled round. Felix waved a triumphant hand and dashed towards his brother. The meeting was all joy.

vii

For weeks and months the Hunters existed in this miserable fashion; with a few pence hastily gathered to meet urgent needs and as hastily spent. Ma sat for the greater part of the day at her sewing-machine, or stitched at the buttons and buttonholes; Felix went sometimes to school, and when he was ashamed to go because he could take no money, or when he was too ill to go, he helped his mother. It was he who trotted backwards and forwards to take the shirts and bring more to be machined. It was he who met Pa and took Godfrey the coppers to pay for his mid-day food in an eating-house. Sometimes, when there was a known five or ten shillings

to come, Ma went with him to the meeting, and the whole family lunched together in an eating-house in Dalston where there were high wooden partitions, and where the lanky boy who waited called the orders as he threw knives and forks before the visitors.

But the strain of such a life was intense. In spite of their natural buoyancy of temper, all the Hunters were affected. Godfrey would come home in the evening and if there was any food would take his portion in silence and would immediately afterwards leave the flat until late at night. Pa would sometimes arrive very late, with glassy eyes and a fixed smile, extremely amiable and irritable in turn. Ma, goaded and exasperated by circumstances, would be harsh with him upon these occasions, and Pa would become penitent and offended and affectionate in an effort to regain her regard. Once she said to him: "If you'd only give me a pound a week I'd pay the rent and keep us all! But this way of starving and living is driving me to desperation!"

Upon that occasion Pa was immediately acquiescent. But after all he was not to blame, for if he had been able to get the work he would have done so. Instead of getting it he was walking round London in all sorts of weather, calling upon firm after firm that gave him casual employment in the engraving of small plates, and doing the work at home at nights under the beam of a shaded lamp. And then he would start out again in the morning, often without food, and would begin again his miserable search.

There came, however, a day when Pa returned home in the evening with a little money, and found Ma busy sewing at a piece of dark serge. She was working in the little brown kitchen in order to economise light; and the bare, ugly, warm room made a background for work and

suffering which could not have been surpassed. Ma was greyer, and but for her eyes would have seemed to be very spiritless. But her glance was free and direct. She put the serge aside in order to get Pa's meal, and while he was eating took up her work again. Besides Pa and Ma, only Felix was there. He was reading, and heard all that passed. Pa, sitting with his cuffs turned up, and his feet well under the kitchen table, looked over his shoulder at Ma. He was in a mood that comes from headache, or walking upon a draughty day in London—a mood of shamed and yet unmanageable rancour; the mood which comes upon Felix when his nose begins to run while he is working, and agonising and spoiling drops fall upon a half-finished sketch.

"What's that you're making?" Pa asked.

"It's a costume for Godfrey. He's taking part in some amateur theatricals."

"Amateur *what?*" cried Pa. "Good Lord!" He pushed his plate away with a savage gesture, and rose to his feet. "Why doesn't he try to make some *money?* Amateur theatricals when I'm walking London footsore and broken-booted. I—" He checked himself, clucking his tongue in anger. "I can't understand it."

"He's working all day," urged Ma, looking up from her sewing. "You were the cause of his being apprenticed. And he's young. He must have recreation."

"Recreation? What recreation have I?" demanded Pa. "Why should *he* have recreation?"

"We both had it when we were young."

"The cases weren't similar. They——"

"And do you realise that neither of the boys has had any real childhood?"

"Whose fault's that?"

"It's nobody's fault, of course. But I'm saying that

they need recreation. It's not as though Godfrey sponged on you. He doesn't. He spends nothing."

"There's nothing to spend!" cried Pa. "Has *that* cost nothing?"

"It's an old curtain. I'm making it into a sort of smock garment. Look!"

But Pa was not to be distracted from his anger. He walked about the room, speaking to himself, ejaculating. His jealousy of Godfrey was roused. He was vehemently angry.

"I'm sick of it," he burst out. "Sick and tired of it. How old is he—eighteen, nineteen? And walking about. . . . No, no, no, no!" He stopped, and forgetful of everything, he thumped his fist upon the table. It was a passionate action. "He shan't have any more from *me!*" cried Pa, furiously. "Nothing. This is the end of it. Is that clear? Here am I, working night after night, padding round every day. . . . I'm sick of the whole affair. It's monstrous. What do I get out of it?"

"I don't get very much," murmured Ma. "We none of us do."

Pa took no notice: the colour was in his cheeks, and he looked ugly, with his underlip standing out and his teeth showing.

"Work, work, work. It's the only thing in my life. It's a misery. And nobody at all to help me."

Felix, who had been listening, cried out at that. He stood looking at his father, his eyes glowing, his face flushed.

"Who d'you want to help you?" he demanded, red hot with anger.

Pa looked at him, and the likeness between them was heightened by their common fury.

"*You*, if you could!" cried Pa contemptuously. "But you can't."

Within a week Felix was in a situation.

"I'm not going to stand that!" he had said to his mother; and at once began to seek work by answering an advertisement. When the letter engaging him arrived, he left it out upon the table beside Pa's waiting supper, so that it should not fail of being seen.

PART TWO: THE BOY

CHAPTER VI: LESSONS IN CHIVALRY

i

THE brilliant typist rattled off letters with her accustomed assurance. She wore a royal blue silk blouse with a high collar which was ornamented with lace. Over her laced cuffs were false keels of paper. She sat majestically erect in her chair, a substantial young person of twenty, who looked thirty-five, and her hair, which she called "woman's crowning glory," mounted up from her brow into a huge and impressive structure. The window before which she worked was grey with dust. Opposite, the new offices of "Punch" could hardly be seen through the intervening grime and the falling dusk. The oil-cloth upon the uneven floor of Messrs. Nimmodyne's Advertising Agency was worn away in many places; and when the boards were not grimily showing through it the pattern was merged swiftly into a general brown. A small fire burned in the grate. An old-fashioned desk which could be closed stood next the typist's table; and above the fireplace was a nest of pigeon-holes filled with dusty letters. The whole office was a curious mixture of warmth and gloom.

So much noise did the typist make, spilling one letter upon another in her careless speed, that she did not hear Felix come in. Only a sense of his presence made her turn.

"Oh, it's you," she said, rather ungraciously, and continued her rattling at a record speed. Felix had hung up his cap, and now stood, a neat little boy of fourteen with

an Eton collar round his neck and a good deal of hair upon his head, holding a letter-book. He saw her florid face and big greenish-blue eyes with secret hostility, for his knowledge of Miss Slowcomb constituted his first experience of brazen unscrupulousness in the human species. And the letter-book in his hand was the thing he most hated. "What's the matter?" she demanded, as she withdrew a letter from the typewriter with a grating flourish.

"I don't feel very well," said Felix, with lugubrious humour.

Miss Slowcomb frowned. She was not very old, and she certainly was not very wise; but she looked wiser than her years, owing to the early maturity of her figure and her naturally patronising attitude towards little boys. She said nothing. Instead, she swept up her letters, and took them into the only other room which the office contained. Her height was tremendous, and her walk that of a marchioness. The three principals worked in the inner office. They were expert advertising agents, each specialising in a different department; and Felix was their office-boy, at six shillings a week. He copied the letters, posted them, and took round papers to different offices. Also, he packed little parcels of advertising matter, delivered them to the London offices of newspapers or to other agents, and ran any small errands. One of his daily errands was to run out at tea-time and buy Miss Slowcomb a chocolate éclair from a neighbouring teashop. He disliked chocolate éclairs in consequence of this regular torture, but owing to the morbid politeness which he shared with other members of his family he was incapable of expressing his dislike. It lived and rankled in his heart.

As soon as Miss Slowcomb had gone into the other room, Felix went over to the tin stand that supported a washing-basin used by the seniors. He felt beneath it

for a tin jug in which water was kept. His face, as he did this, and as he found the jug empty, became distorted with anger and fear; but already Felix was learning to force himself to many distasteful acts, and he lifted the jug and went quietly out of the room again with it. For one so acutely nervous this task was the most horrible of all Felix had to perform. It involved trotting down the bare wooden stairs from the second floor to the basement; and the basement was stacked with rubbish. As the office was in one of the streets between Fleet Street and the Thames Embankment the yard was swarming with enormous river rats, so savage and so lacking in decent timidity that they ignored little boys and would run over their feet. Felix lived in terror of them.

Two shaggy rats watched him fill the big tin jug, and Felix stared at their big grey bodies and thick tails and bright eyes until he could bear it no longer. He turned away his head. When he looked again the rats were gone. Felix might almost have dreamt they were there. His jug was filled. He carried it up the stairs, and placed it quietly beneath the wash stand. This done, still trembling slightly, he got out his materials for copying the letters. Miss Slowcomb was still in the other room, and he could hear her voice near the door. Darkness came early in this dirty place with the coated windows, and Felix knew that when she re-entered the outer office Miss Slowcomb would light the gas. He could hear the traffic in Fleet Street, and in the street below newspaper boys shouting the winners. He did not feel well; he rarely felt well; he had too little to eat. You cannot get much of a lunch for fourpence a day. One boy he knew had a pennyworth of acid-drops and a drink at the fountain in the Embankment gardens; but this was admitted to be an inadequate meal. Felix did better, but not much better.

Miss Slowcomb rustled out of the inner office, evidently pleased with herself. She was smiling, and rattling her bangles, looking very huge and matronly. With a gesture almost of disdain she gave the letters to Felix, turned and lighted the gas, and brought out from beneath a blotting pad her own private letters which she proceeded to enter in the firm's post-book. But as she did this Miss Slowcomb was struck by a thought. It was characteristic of her simple-mindedness that she placed in the moral equanimity of Felix a perfectly lavish confidence. She was not the only woman to place reliance in Felix's tact, but she was the first.

"Tell me a name, Felix!" she entreated. "I can't put Botty a third time this week."

"You shouldn't write to her so often," remarked Felix. "Oh . . . Montefiore. . . ."

"*That's* a good name!" exclaimed Miss Slowcomb. No, I think I'll put Robinson."

"Don't you know how to spell it?"

"Don't be absurd," she whispered. "Nobody notices an *ordinary* name. See what I mean? Still, that one of yours was very good. Hurry up, Felix; there's a good boy. I want to get off early. Mother's coming up to town, and we're going to do a pit."

"I can't get them to copy," grumbled Felix. "Look, just a smudge. It's awful!"

"I know. Mr. Parsons was trying to read one in the book this afternoon. He was awfully angry."

Felix frowned again. He knew that Miss Slowcomb was unlikely to have been his friend in that incident, owing to her peculiar temperament, which led her to agree with power at all times, and sacrifice the helpless. To save herself she would have sacrificed, Felix thought, her own mother, fond though she was of that horrid woman.

"Couldn't you get a new ribbon?"

"Oh, Felix, I'm sorry . . ." began Miss Slowcomb, and she looked exactly like a cat in her rather malicious amusement. "I'm afraid you'll have to get some water up." She glanced aside at him. Felix said nothing, but viciously turned the handle of the copying-press. He knew that she was happy in his horror of the rats: it aroused her cruelty. Most likely she and Mr. Peppin had relished the joke together earlier in the afternoon. Heat rose in him—partly the heat of anger, partly that of exertion. But he ignored her remark. Miss Slowcomb remembered that Felix was only an office boy, and continued: "Did you hear what I said? It's no good, Felix. It's got to *be* got. Mr. Peppin was saying . . ."

"I don't care *what* Mr. Peppin says . . ." observed Felix, upright and flushed, confirmed in his suspicion that Miss Slowcomb and Mr. Peppin had discussed the empty jug at his expense. "He's a mangy little beast."

"Well, if you won't do it, I *must* tell Mr. Parsons. That's all, Felix. I don't *want* to get you into a row, but you see how it is. Are you going to do it, or not?" From entreaty with an undercurrent of taunting, she had made a change to the manner of a school-mistress with a sullen child. Finding that ineffective, Miss Slowcomb made a further change. She became peremptory. "Now, Felix!"

Felix took the letter-book from the press, and Mr. Parsons came into the outer office.

"Mr. Parsons, I'm sorry to say that Felix refuses to go and fill the water-jug," said Miss Slowcomb, in an extremely virtuous voice.

Mr. Parsons was the manager of this firm, and the most powerful person in it. He was a big man with a stamping gait. He had been very dark, but his hair was now silvering. A little black moustache above a neat mouth gave his face distinction, and the eyes behind his

pince-nez were keen. They were fixed now upon Felix with a sternness which half-concealed such amusement and sympathy that Felix grinned.

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Parsons, as if in thundering incredulity of such rebelliousness in his office. Nevertheless, he looked at Felix with what might almost have been a species of sex-freemasonry.

"Yes," sighed another voice, a hissing sibilant voice. "I must say that Felix shows great independence. He shirks distasteful tasks. . . ." Mr. Peppin—always resentful of Felix's lack of servility to himself—began to press one hand upon another in his active dislike and its present pleasurable satisfaction. His little face glowed with pleasure at the thought of an authoritative rebuke.

"And what is the reason of your refusal?" demanded Mr. Parsons, majestically.

"Because I've filled it already," answered Felix, with a look of hatred at Mr. Peppin which, owing to the difficulty with which the face of Felix expressed anything but geniality, appeared to be mere impertinent delight.

ii

The only person in his first office whom Felix really disliked was Mr. Peppin, a small Welshman who was deceitful and weakly bullying as the result of his own feeling of incapacity. Mr. Peppin was the least of the three members of the firm, and he had to do all the inferior tasks. But, although he knew them to be inferior, he had not the courage to demand others, and he was stupid. The mean little thin face of Mr. Peppin was that of a much-beaten hungry dog; and he was rather more ginger in colour than Felix himself. Mr. Parsons was a big shrewd simpleton, who knew his work thoroughly and at Tulse Hill upon summer evenings played an ex-

cellent, if slow, game of tennis. Mr. Bowman was a dreamy blue-eyed creature who was by faith a Buddhist, by inclination a scholar and an inventor, and by force of circumstance a slow-thinking, slow-speaking advertising agent with the instinctive cunning of a fox. Pose him with a question, and he would laboriously advance reasons for and against in his swollen-throated, rather difficult, speech; but in an emergency his actions were those of a fugitive animal in adroitness and speed. Felix knew this at once, through catching a side glance which was exactly like one from the groaning Grumps. There were other perambulating agents who appeared in the office from time to time. All—except Mr. Peppin, who disliked him—took notice of Felix.

Mr. Peppin disliked Felix because of the evil eye. One or two people have noticed it. Felix looks at a person with innocent inquiringness, and the guilty soul shrieks "Don't!" Mr. Peppin had no special sin upon his conscience, beyond incapacity and a habit of oiling his hair with something that made it look like coagulated vaseline; but he dreaded the eye of Felix. And he disliked Felix for his readiness. Once, when he found in a cupboard a number of copies of a paper, six weeks old, which Felix should have delivered at the time of publication, he sprang the discovery upon his enemy. He did it in the manner of one of those Scotland Yard inspectors who are so ridiculed in the stories of Sherlock Holmes. He said, "What iss the meaning of thisss, Felix?" And he was instantly disarmed when Felix frankly joined him in cries of marvel and bewilderment, as though it were not Felix who was in fault but some peculiar agency with designs upon both Felix and Mr. Peppin.

"Extraordinary!" said Felix, looking at these most incriminating papers.

"And you don't remember anything about them?" questioned Mr. Peppin, with a severe eye.

"Nothing whatever!" cried Felix, his countenance so clear that Mr. Peppin was made speechless. "I'd better go and ask the people if they *had* them."

Mr. Peppin snarled; for the paper was one of which, as Mr. Peppin knew, and as Mr. Peppin knew that Felix knew, nobody wanted to see voucher copies. The incident closed; and even Miss Slowcomb was not sure whether Felix was merely a consummate actor or one who shared Mr. Peppin's chagrin.

iii

But after the incident of the water-jug, when the heads had retired, Miss Slowcomb was very angry indeed. She turned upon Felix, her face pink, and her tears—which were always easy—reddening the rims of her eyes.

"What did you want to make a fool of me like that for?" she demanded, with heat.

Felix looked indignantly at her, surprised at the tone.

"But you made a complaint against me," he protested. "What did you do that for?"

"That's different," said Miss Slowcomb. "Quite different. You ought to have *told* me you'd got it up. It was very unkind of you, Felix. Oh, dear!" She wiped her eyes.

"Why is it different?" said the puzzled Felix. "I didn't begin it."

"Because you're a man, and I'm a woman. That's why it's different," said Miss Slowcomb. "You ought *always* to be chivalrous to a woman, Felix."

Felix made no answer. He was busy with a problem which puzzled him. There seemed to him to be some flaw in Miss Slowcomb's argument, and yet he agreed with

what Miss Slowcomb said. He finished copying the letters, still thinking. Agreeing as he did with Miss Slowcomb's main contention, that he ought always to be chivalrous to women, he still felt aggrieved. Chivalrous *whatever* she did? He came to the conclusion that the flaw was one of taste; accepting the rule, he did not think Miss Slowcomb should have known anything about it. Or, knowing it, that she should have felt entitled to claim her due. She wasn't entitled to have it both ways, was she?

After all, Miss Slowcomb had begun the trouble.

Idiot! (Miss Slowcomb, of course.)

iv

Miss Slowcomb washed her hands in the bowl, and dried them upon her own towel. She looked at the cosy fire, and then looked into her mirror. While she was doing this the door of the outer office opened, and a small brisk man with a waxed moustache entered like a breeze. He came straight in, rubbing his hands and saying "Ah!" as some men do when they have been out in the cold. Upon his face was a purely formal ingratiating smile, which frequently appeared there. This was Mr. Cracken, a canvasser. He liked to think of himself as alert, spruce, as one who radiated energy, enterprise, and intelligence; and he certainly did all this. With one movement he threw down his hat and some papers, drew back a chair, and leapt out of it again. He radiated so much energy that he affected Miss Slowcomb as an Irish terrier affects a cat sitting only just out of reach of its enthusiastic springs.

"I can't *bear* that man!" she told Felix, when Mr. Cracken had disappeared for a moment into the inner room. "He curdles my blood. I can't *bear* men with

waxed moustaches. He's like a jack-in-the-box. Smartness . . . I hate it. Cheap, common. . . ." She wrinkled her nose, stooping as she put on her hat, and looking into the mirror, with a hatpin held between her teeth. She had forgotten her humiliation. She might remember it tomorrow, and be cold to him; but she was often cold to him, and he never knew the reasons of her moods. It was enough that for the present she was amiable. Felix did not study the question.

Mr. Cracken's return hastened Miss Slowcomb's departure to meet her mother. He came from the inner room as a stone from a catapult, with quick dapper steps making for his chair.

"Goodnight, Miss; goodnight, Miss!" he called, cheerily. And as the door closed he turned to Felix, his head smartly cocked. "The dear ladies," he remarked. "Fine woman, that, Felix. And of course you gotta bear in mind then when I speak of fine women I mean *fine women*. See what I mean, boy?"

"I do, indeed, Mr. Cracken," said Felix.

"Damn little swine! And now!" He plunged his hands among his papers, with which he busied himself while he was talking. "Tell you what, Felix, advertising's no good. No good, my boy. I understand it, A to Z. See? My mother," he resumed, "she ought to have known what she was about—because there's eight of us. Well, my mother said to me—twenty years ago—thirty years ago? How old am I now? I forget. Once you're past forty you *do* forget. And I'm not even sure if I've passed forty or not. . . ."

"What did your mother do?" asked Felix.

"Eh?" Mr. Cracken had been talking as he considered other matters, and so he had mentally mislaid his mother. "Well, now, what *didn't* she do? I remember once saying to a fellow I was canvassing, 'My mother bore me!'

And he said back 'And now *you* bore *me*.' Smart, that. Of course, I laughed—he-he-he. Silly fool. Put him in a good temper, that did. So I got my order. If you go on the road, Felix, keep your temper. They'll treat you like a dog. And—what I mean, you've got to rub your own nose in it. See? As if you liked it."

Felix stood listening. But he did not let the suggestion pass altogether.

"I shan't go on the road," he said. "I'm going to be an artist."

"And what the hell's *that*, when it's at 'ome?" racily rejoined Mr. Cracken. "D'you want to starve, boy?" Felix shuddered. "No, no, no. Earn your living respectable. Adverts, my boy. There's only one artist—one great artist—in the world's history. And that's Euclid."

"Euclid?" asked Felix.

"Yes, he invented the circle, didn't he? What I mean, it's the perfect shape. There's everything in a circle."

"Round and round," said Felix. "I know kids' games are, like 'ring a ring o' roses.'"

"The best things in life are circular—the sun, the earth, a sovereign, a pot o' beer."

"Yes, and tours," agreed the fascinated Felix. "What's a vicious circle?"

"Ah, there . . ." Mr. Cracken, who all this time had been writing little notes, and reading other little notes, and opening and shutting drawers in his desk; "there you go into a figure of speech. There's no such thing as a vicious . . . circle." The pause was due to a drawer, the contents of which by rising up on end, prevented Mr. Cracken from opening the drawer at all. "What does the poet say? 'On earth the broken arc, in heaven the perfect circle.' Something of that sort. Damn this drawer. What we want in this place is more room. So I *tell* the

governors. However, between you and me, Felix, they don't pay no attention to what I say. It all goes like water off a duck's back, in at one ear and out the other. Let 'em wait. I had my fortune told the other night. Titled lady, too—so they said. She looked at my hand—not this one; the other—and she give a scream. 'My God!' she says"—he rendered the words in falsetto—" 'My God! *What* a hand!' I said 'Sorry, your ladyship; I suppose it's been too near the plough, and got chawed up a bit.' She says, '*Never* have I seen a hand with so much wordly success in it!' I told my missis. She got all of a furr. Better 'urry up, she said. You and your two quid a week. Well, Felix, I don't tell my wife everything, any more than you tell yours. She thinks I get two quid a week. All right, let her think."

"I don't believe she thinks anything of the kind," interposed Felix, who now had all his letters ready for the post. He was standing ready to put on his cap the moment Mr. Cracken stopped talking.

"You're quite right, Mr. Felix. You're quite right. She don't think anything of the kind. There she is in her furs, toying with rich jewels and truffles in aspic—or with a toothpick; 'while I, the beggar, must stand aside.' " His last words were trolled. "Well, now, you get off, Felix. You're interrupting me with your chatter, don't you see; and the longer *you* stay the longer *I* stay. 'My time's *your* time,' as the young man said to the lady who asked him what time he liked his bath in the morning."

Leaving Mr. Cracken to his work, Felix, after visiting the inner room, took his letters and went out into the violent bustle of Fleet Street at posting time. He was one of hundreds, who, armed with waste-paper baskets full of letters and packets, rushed towards the gaping mouths of the post office boxes. Avalanches of letters, a

few rattled heads and kicked shins, and then collisions with those who followed upon the same course. Felix was small enough to slip in under the arms of the taller boys, and therefore was not delayed. His work for the day finished, he turned homeward. He still—after some months of experience with the firm of Nimmodyne—felt very grown up. The lights and crowds of Fleet Street were still a marvel. The face of the clock at the Law Courts, and beyond that the lovely church of St. Clement Danes, entranced him. His heart swelled at all sorts of divine and intricate beauties which came not only visually and spiritually, but as celestial harmony. So, walking through the crowds, he was unconscious of his progress, was conscious only of poetry and sweetness which moved rapture in his heart.

v

Circumstances with the Hunters had improved. Pa, after despairing efforts, had obtained a regular situation in the engraving department of a firm in Farringdon Street, at a salary of twenty-seven shillings-and-sixpence a week. Godfrey was at last earning a few shillings. Felix had six shillings a week. His fares cost him sixpence a day; his lunches (except on Saturday, when he went home at one or two o'clock), fourpence a day; and he was allowed to keep the remaining one and fourpence as pocket money and as a contribution towards boots. He was thus richer than he had ever been.

Pa was buying W. T. Stead's "Penny Poets," in their orange paper covers, and was beginning to buy two penny series of abridged novels by classic authors. Godfrey bought "Chums" each week, and at times pennies were spared for the purchase of serial numbers of Harcourt Burrage's long stories, "The Lambs of Littlecote" and

"The Island School." In literature, therefore, the Hunters did well. They had a most varied supply of reading matter, and when one day Felix found in "The Newsagent's and Bookseller's Reviews" a statement that "The Family Herald" and "Family Herald Supplement" were "the alpha and omega of the work-girl, so far as her literary pabulum is concerned," it was agreed that even Ma's tastes were reputable.

Otherwise, Ma, who had given up shirt-making for money, devoted herself to housework, cooking, and the making and mending of clothes for them all; Godfrey pursued his amateur theatricals; Felix drew in odd hours and read everything he could find; and Pa smoked, read, was agreeable to all, and grew continuously thinner and less robust. His cough, which had been intermittent, became a steady cause of anxiety to Ma. He and she would sometimes take walks together, but more often would stay at home and rest; the boys would go, every month or so, to the gallery of a theatre or music-hall; all were happy and amused and expectant. There was still life, there was still hope; and each one of them had occupation.

vi

Felix travelled on the front seat of the omnibus, near the driver, looked down upon the earth from that height above it, and his heart was in the skies. And every now and then, upon this journey home, he would catch in the evening darkness such glimpses of light and shadow as he never forgot. They made him exclaim to himself, sitting very quietly and observantly upon the front seat in the biting air, huddled within his overcoat, his cap upon the back of his head, and his eyes bright in his little white face. To ride thus upon an omnibus enabled Felix to pretend that he was in a chariot or in a boat which

triumphantly crested the foaming waters. Everything made pictures for him; pictures and melodies and harmonies. His heart sang. It was as though glee lived within him. His days were ecstasies, and his nights now long and dreamless. He was getting better and stronger; he was interested and alive.

Even the flat no longer troubled Felix. He gave two thumping knocks at the downstairs front door, and was admitted by Ma. Everything was neat and warm upstairs; there was a fire; there was dinner; and afterwards, if the night was fine, Felix thought that he would run out to meet Jack Howell. There were matters which he wished to discuss with Jack.

Jack Howell, who was six months older than Felix, was a bold and charming boy. To see him bowl at cricket, with his lips tightly compressed, a medium-paced ball which looked simple to the observer but which took wickets, and to watch his right arm sweeping over, while the fingers of his left hand spread in a sort of swimming movement, always gave Felix the most intense imaginative satisfaction. Jack was also a footballer of skill, with dangerous robustness and ruthlessness at command, a tendency to shoot hard and often and straight, and a fair turn of speed. When knocked off the ball by a back heavier than himself, Jack was never to be reckoned as one defeated, for he was untiring, and rebounded like india-rubber.

Jack had gone to business about six months after Felix, when he was fifteen. He was in the order department of a firm of coal-merchants near King's Cross, and it did not appear from Jack's accounts that he regarded coal-orders as of much moment. During his first week in the office he had had a fight, and had cut another boy's head open; while the doing of "dags" (or "dares") seemed to fill most of his time and the time of his contemporaries.

Work or a sense of responsibility for work never entered his mind during extra-working hours. He was thus the typical boy clerk. In ten years he would marry, settle down, and become a regular business man. Now, he was thinking of making a change, for he was not attached to coal, and in those days a smart boy could obtain a fresh situation as often and as easily as he chose. Moreover, Jack was one of those who join to determination an experimental quality which creates restlessness. He remained the round-faced, sturdy boy he had been when he first met Felix, but already his inclination for art and letters was dwindling. He was a smoker, spent all his money upon himself, and was altogether much more robust in his tastes than Felix. Nevertheless, he did not despise Felix, because Felix in some way did not allow himself to be despised by anybody.

The boys met, as it happened, in the Seven Sisters Road, and whistled solemnly to each other. Thereafter they mooched along side by side, with their hands in their pockets, sometimes in silence turning down a side road, sometimes, mutually responsive, stopping and looking at lighted shop windows, talking at intervals. They told each other the news of the day.

"They've got photographs of Dreyfus pasted up in a window in Fleet Street," said Felix suddenly. "Big crowds round them."

"Will they hang him?" asked Jack, whose ideas were vague as to the course of French military law.

"I don't know what he's done," admitted Felix.

"And I don't care," said Jack. "I think they ought to hang him. He's a Jew."

"Well, he's a human being," retorted Felix. "That's all."

Jack thought for a minute. Then he addressed Felix for his own good.

"Now that's a thing I've noticed about you," he said. "It's soppy. You think too much about human beings."

"No, I don't. I only talk about them," was the rejoinder. It did not serve.

"You *think* about 'em, I say," repeated Jack. "And if I have any more of your lip, young Felix Hunter, I'll give you a clip side of the head. And what you got to do, is to think a bit less. You're a Socialist, that's what you are."

This pleased Felix. He smiled in the darkness. The most mischievous expression crossed his face.

"Oh, I don't think I am," he tempted. "I'm a Liberal. My father's one."

"*That* rotten lot!" cried Jack. "Why, they're mouldy."

"You've got it wrong, Jack."

The answer was so unequivocal that Felix, who saw it coming, took to his heels. After a short chase they resumed their colloquy, very breathless, and Felix laughing.

"You better come to our show for tea, Saturday," observed Jack. "Mother and Dad's going to be out, and I can't stand those two cripples by myself."

Felix sighed. He would have liked to ask his friend to Flemington Road. It was a problem.

"Look here," he said. "Why not come round to my place?"

"Promised to be home. Better come."

"I'm rather afraid of your sisters."

"Pooh! If they give you any lip we'll make it warm for them." Jack was full of scorn for the girls. "Young Bess isn't so bad," he admitted. "It's Molly who's the trouble. Comes the elder sister a bit too much. And what's more, she's a sneak, too. Did I tell you about her sneaking to mother about my fags? Rotten, it was. Shouted out about my yellow fingers at tea, and said

how I reeked of tobacco; and then went and dug a packet of fags out of my overcoat pocket. I clipped her for it afterwards. Fortunately mother's a decent sort, and she only laughed. Molly wasn't half wild. Started ranting on to me about little boys and disgusting habits, and so on. She's got to the fastidious age, you know—manicures her nails, and that sort of thing. I stopped her. I told her I'd never said anything about her smoking out of the bedroom window. . . . She got as red as anything. Still, wasn't it a sneaky thing to do! Not manly, you know. They've got no decent feelings like a man has about honour. I told her so. She said 'Honour!' as much as to say 'Pickles!' "

Jack's sisters were a source of great dissatisfaction to their brother, and the basis of all his anti-feministic theories. He knew them too well. He saw them too often. He heard their voices too clearly and resented their poor witticisms too acutely. When Jack said "women," or "they," he was preparing invective. He listened now to Felix's facetious story of Miss Slowcomb and the water-jug with rising anger against the sex. "Of course," he agreed, acknowledging Felix's admission of cowardice; "you oughtn't to be afraid of a few rats. I'd like to fight with twenty of 'em, in the dark, they all leaping for me. . . . Jolly fine! Still, that's got nothing to do with it. She'd be pretty frightened of a rat herself. 'They' always are. It's what I say! They've got no sense of honour. She's just like young Moll. She oughtn't to have gone blabbing like that, and it served her right. There's no doubt about it, young Felix, women *are* . . ."

He was plunged into a morass of monologue upon the subject. If it did nothing else, Jack's eloquence excited himself. He became incoherent. Felix walked along by his friend's side, amused and mischievous. He

was thinking ahead, of Saturday, of all sorts of little whimsical things that came from nowhere into his mind. Presently he heard nothing, being occupied with his own fantastic notions.

"I say, you'd better toddle along on Saturday," Jack said, after his tirade had come to an end and after they had both, as he supposed, reflected upon the new truths which it held.

There was a pause, during which Jack thought that his friend was wrestling manfully with disinclination. He began almost to be concerned at the prospect of a lonely tea with Molly and Bess. Such an event would be a torture. Most likely there would be a scrap, and a wiggling from mother afterwards. His face fell.

"All right, I'll come," Felix said grudgingly, as if under pressure. But he was secretly elated. Girls were such enthralling mysteries. He loved to see them smile and move their heads with innocent grace. He did not understand his feeling towards them.

vii

At last Saturday came. Mr. Parsons left the office early in order to play golf; Mr. Bowman did not come at all. Mr. Peppin remained until the last minute, trotting into the outer office and back to his own desk with such frequency as to suggest to Miss Slowcomb that he was spying upon her. She resented it. There was something so *ungentlemanly* about Mr. Peppin, she told Felix. There was also something very eccentric about his behaviour. At last even Mr. Peppin donned his top hat and overcoat, only to resume his trotting journeys for a further ten minutes. At each departure the two prisoners looked balefully at him over their shoulders,

and then, with tossed heads, at each other. The clock moved on. It was already a quarter-past-one.

Mr. Peppin came out of the inner room buttoning his overcoat and holding his gloves and umbrella. He looked ready for Church.

"It seems as if the sun was still shining," he whistled.

"It'll set soon," answered Felix, suggestively.

Mr. Peppin scowled. But he was such a ginger-coloured man that his scowl was ineffective. It only appeared as if he had a slight pain.

"Well, good-afternoon, Miss Slowcomb. "Good-afternoon, Felix."

He took off his hat. He was gone. But they were too wise to move immediately. Mr. Peppin could never be regarded as having authentically finished with the office until he could be observed by a craning Miss Slowcomb trotting up towards Fleet Street. Upon this day she signalled the welcome sight by throwing the post book into her desk with a crash that sent her ruler flying.

"Hurry up, Felix!" she cried. But Felix was at the door.

"Goo'bye!" he called over his shoulder. He was down the stairs and out into the street so quickly that Mr. Peppin was not yet out of sight. Felix hid behind other pedestrians, watching carefully, and at last ran swiftly in the opposite direction to the one taken by Mr. Peppin.

He hurried home, full of expectation. This afternoon he was going out to tea. What luck! How splendid! He was all pleasure.

viii

With the Howell girls, who were both dark, was a friend whom Felix had never seen before. Whereas Molly was taller than Jack, and thin, with a straight face

and lanky hair; and Bess shorter, rounder, cleverer, and much rosier than her sister; the visitor was a small pale fair girl. She was called Estelle Ferguson. She looked so fragile, so exquisitely delicate with her clear fine skin and blue eyes, that Felix fell instantly in love. Estelle's hair was nearly golden; her hands were very slim and tender; the soft sweet dress of muslin which she wore was of a lovely pearl-like colour; she made Felix think of the flower called columbine. She was the same age, he found, as himself; and to his relief was about two months younger. He would be fifteen before her.

They all sat round the tea-table, and even Jack was subdued by the presence of this charming stranger. Felix saw jealously that Jack kept looking at her, that he passed the jam politely to his sisters, and took his cup gently from Molly's austere hand, and drank without noise. The little girl had a rather plaintive voice. When she was addressed she replied with a dying "yes," so sweet and so demure as to be perfectly ravishing. Felix's mind took great leaps. He imagined her walking by his side, very shy but very affectionate and trusting, while he laughed away her fears of enormous rats. He saw her sitting, frightened to fainting, in a trap behind a run-away pony; the reins terribly dragging at the pony's heels and increasing its fears. And himself leaping out, running . . . the horse still trembling under his sympathetic pat, but nosing into his shoulder with immediate affection. And Estelle: "How can I ever thank you?" as he lifted her feather-weight from the trap and supported her with his arm. . . . And themselves looking at a most beautiful cottage set in the loveliest of shady, rose-filled gardens; and Estelle at last turning the blissful silence to music with a breaking voice of wonder: "And is this yours?" and himself answering her: "Ours, if you will . . ." He sighed, awakening once again to the tea-table.

They were all still there: nobody was observing him. A pang of self-pity for their neglect seized Felix. Forgotten! He well understood the pathos of that picture—which bore the title “Forgotten!”—of a horse out in the snow, while the shadows of roisterers could be seen upon the window-blind. The horse was himself. They were all drinking their tea, and he was alone; and Jack had been talking to Estelle. He had passed her the cake. He had described how a poor crippled old woman, hobbling to catch her tram that afternoon, had slipped in the mud and fallen sprawling. And how he had gone to her assistance and had picked up her crutch and her purse and her dropped bundle.

At first disgusted at the sentimentality of this story, Felix awoke in face of Estelle’s absorption to its sickening significance. He listened more intently. He felt dread clutching his heart. Was there to be rivalry between Jack and himself? He did not think he *could* stand aside as friends were supposed to do in such cases. It was too severe a test of friendship. Please God it would never come to that. And yet here was Jack, who would normally have helped the old woman up, sworn, rather ashamed of himself, and said nothing about the adventure, laying himself out to appear in Estelle’s eyes a creature of the most poignant sensibility—a very perfect, gentle knight. He had painted a tragic picture in order to gain her interest; he had artfully insinuated, in order to heighten that interest and direct it, a glimpse of his own fine character. And he was succeeding. The inference was only too clear. Felix was rendered desperate by his insight. Estelle was much affected, it was evident; for her shudders, her horrified “Oh!” and “Ach” at the catastrophe indicated as much.

“Yes,” she murmured; and her voice thrilled Felix as the sound of a running brook would thrill a parched

traveller. "One *does* feel so awful when they see those sort of things. It's terrible."

And then she looked across at Felix with a sad little smile of encouragement that made him lose his head.

"Yes," he said. "But I saw a still more terrible thing as I came home. A beautiful girl. . . ." He tried by his pause and his roaming glance to suggest *how* beautiful; and then blurted out "She was very like *you*. . . . She was sitting in a trap, and the horse running away—galloping. The reins were dragging along the ground, getting all muddy, and entangled with the horse's feet. . . . Maddening him. . . . The horse was foaming, and his nostrils all red, and the trap swaying and switching about the road on the tramlines. And people all turning away their heads because they couldn't bear to look. Ladies fainting, men going pale. . . ." He paused. The perspiration was on his brow. The strain; the excitement of his own invention; both were terrible. The three girls were all staring at him, their faces white, their eyes wide with horror.

"Go on! go on!" cried Molly and Bess. "Was she killed?"

"No; she was saved," breathed Felix.

There was a gasp of relief from Jack's sisters.

"Who saved her? Did you?" whispered Estelle.

Felix looked involuntarily at Jack's lowered head. Jack was staring very hard at his plate. He was embarrassed; his lip was twitching. Felix drew his breath to answer; and then at the fine point of delivery his courage failed.

"No," he answered, modestly. "No. Another man got there first."

CHAPTER VII: ESTELLE: FIRST ROUND

i

AN extraordinary piece of good fortune befel Felix hereabouts. Pa gave him a watch. It cost three shillings and sixpence (with a year's guarantee). Pa had seen it with others of its kind hanging in a shop near King's Cross where they sold jewelery. He had no watch himself; but it occurred to him most passionately that Felix ought to have a watch. The more often he thought of it the more keen did his conviction become. He mentioned the matter to Ma. He saved up for three weeks. And one Sunday morning, at breakfast, Felix found beside his place at the table, pointing to the right time, and emitting a hearty tick that Godfrey pretended he could hear from the bedroom, a large and shining watch. Felix stared at it. His face flushed deeply. He gave a gleeful shout.

"Oh!" he cried. It seemed too good to be true. When he was convinced that this was not dreaming he was for once almost speechless with delight. He could only stammer: "How splendid! How *splendid!*" and at last, with such difficulty that he could hardly be heard: "Thank you ever so much!"

His first thought was to show it to Ma; his next was to pat Pa vigorously upon the head in gratitude. Pa sat at the table without his coat, for he had prepared the breakfast, and proposed to dress later. He ducked under Felix's caress, and in retaliation reached round with his hand for Felix's knees. Felix, however, moved away to

safety, his colour still high with excitement. Then he put the watch in his pocket, and pulled it out again, comparing the seconds hand with that of the clock upon the mantelpiece. Throughout the meal he had often, in order that he might fully relish his pleasure, to consult the shining face of this precious gift.

"Strange," said Godfrey, who was in the secret, as he came very late to breakfast, bowing to excuse himself, "there's a most terrible noise this morning. Loud explosions. Why, it's worse in here. Like a grandfather clock."

"It's my watch," observed Felix, laconically. "See?" He held it out for inspection.

"A fine child!" exclaimed Godfrey, handling the watch with awe. "Lusty."

"It's like Felix; got a loud voice," said Pa, jocosely. "It speaks for itself."

"Oh, Ma! I haven't got a loud *speaking* voice, have I!" appealed Felix.

"It's a very nice voice and a very nice watch . . . Here you are!" Godfrey handed back the watch. "What are you going to do with it at night? You'll frighten Mrs. Taylor out of her wits. She'll think it's the death watch."

"Under my pillow, of course," cried Felix indignantly.

"It'll keep me awake."

"Don't be so dainty! It'll lull you to sleep. It'll be like waves, lapping the edge of the bed."

Godfrey grimaced at the notion of waves lapping his bed.

"The roar of the breakers," he supplemented. "The thunder of the surf. I suppose one gets used to cannonade. To anything, as a matter of fact. Has Squeal got a watch?"

Felix nodded. Squeal was Godfrey's impudent way of referring to Jack Howell, as he knew.

"Beauty," he answered shortly. "Used to be his father's. It's got a front on it—yes, a hunter. . . . Did *you* ever have a watch, Pa?"

"Er . . . well, yes, Felix," Pa admitted. "And Ma had one, too. A very little one."

"Put away?"

"Put away."

"Couldn't you get it out?"

"It's some time ago. The tickets have expired. We couldn't renew them at the time." Pa spoke with a jaunty air of his negotiations with pawnbrokers; but he was embarrassed. These things held much distress for him because they wounded his pride; not because he remembered particular associations or hardships.

"Would you like this?" asked Felix. He recognised that it was useless to offer it to Ma.

"When my ship comes home I'll get one for myself, thanks," said Pa. "I want a gold one."

"I'll give you a gold one, if you'll wait," promised Felix.

They ate their breakfast. They were all very happy. All, that is, but Ma, who had heard Pa coughing in the night, and was more and more alarmed.

ii

Felix was already dressed; and the langour of a London Sunday was in the air. All the shops were shut. Very few people, most of them in stiff collars and squeaky boots, were walking the murky streets. He looked out of the window at a milkman, fidgetting. Strongly in his mind was the impulse to take his new watch for an airing. He wanted to compare it with all the clocks in the neighbourhood. It would give him a new test of values to apply. He wanted to be able to pull it out of his pocket

with a nonchalant appearance of long practice. Under all these wishes, almost hidden from his attention, was the thought that if he went out he might meet Estelle and show the watch to her.

He was not unaware of the fact that the watch looked what it was—a cheap watch. That did not matter in the least. It was a watch; it was his; it had been given to him. So few things were given to him that Felix appreciated a present at its highest value. He was touched and grateful; but also it was necessary to him to show the watch to others. Of what use was any article just to one's self?

And so with elaborate carelessness, Felix left his parents and went out, exactly at the moment when the first church bells began to ring. Opportunity number one: yes, they were quite to time. He was glad of it. The love of precision was already strong in him. And as a weak sun shed a faint golden radiance upon the crowds of churchgoers he was pleased. They looked pleasant people—pleasant and kindly people. He liked them. And as he passed these churchgoers, it appeared to him that they looked in his direction with kindness, showing that even when they were plain they had great beauties of heart and feeling to sustain them.

Church bells were ugly; but the sounds of an organ playing, or of a congregation singing in unison, were always extraordinarily romantic and charming. They reminded him of "Faust," of Marguerite's figure in the middle of a big open space, and of girls and men coming out of that imaginary church, passing, stopping . . . hurrying by with heads averted from some incomprehensible sin. It wasn't religion; it was the thought of a girl, quite alone, fainting, without succour. Felix felt pity. He felt great pity in his soft heart.

Marguerite was fair . . . with blue eyes and hair that

was almost golden. Very fragile, and as soft as a kitten. She had sweet little pale cheeks, and looked sideways in the most flattering, submissive way, so that you felt that she stood in need of protection. Poor Estelle . . . Marguerite, he meant. He wondered if Estelle had a watch.

By this time the first ringing of the church bells had given place to a doleful single note. Felix walked more slowly, in time to this slow ringing. Small bunches of people came into sight from moment to moment, walking briskly and sometimes rustling. He could pretend just how they would go into church, and all kneel down, covering their eyes with a single hand and thinking how hard the stool or the hassock was to their knees; and feeling that peculiar squeaking scrape of the points of their boot-soles against the floorboard which always set Felix's teeth upon edge.

It struck him that one or two of these passing church-goers looked at him rather strangely, intently—almost as if they were listening. . . . He wondered what they thought they heard.

Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, said his watch.

How extraordinary! He could hear his watch ticking. Felix stopped, listening. There was no mistake. Tick, tick, tick—it was like the rolling of a drum. It seemed to fill his ears. Tick, tick, tick. At his puzzled face an elegant youth who was passing smiled contemptuously. Felix caught the smile. Immediately it flashed into his mind that the youth had heard his watch ticking.

"Oh, be *quiet*, you little thing!" he whispered, suddenly self-conscious.

Tick, tick, tick, tick, said the watch in reply.

It was terrible! The watch was drawing all eyes to him! He felt it growing larger and larger, as though its dial covered his chest, and its ticking was magnified a

hundred-fold. Those who passed might almost have read the flying minutes as they ran, so swiftly did they now hurry to church. Felix became diseased about this boisterous watch. It frightened him with its ferocious noise. It was not like a tick, but like pickaxes struck hard upon flints, or hammers in steady rotation upon a road-breakers' nail.

With a fugitive glance about him, Felix turned into a side street that had no living persons walking along its pathways. It was a relief to do this. The noise, however loud, and however it might echo in the deserted street, at least provoked no glances of impertinent censure. He was more at ease. He began to reason with himself. These people could not have heard his watch. It was ridiculous! They *could* not. And yet how conscious they had looked. Yes, but that was because of other things—because of his face, which perhaps they did not like—because of his shabby boots. . . .

Anyway, if they *did* notice, what did it matter? They couldn't take the watch away from him. He hated censoriousness worse than anything in the world. Censoriousness and stupidity and . . . And in any case, it was awfully quiet on Sundays. You'd notice anything. It was different on weekdays, when there was traffic about. You didn't notice any noises then, because there were so many of them. There was only one Sunday in a week. He'd get used to people staring. . . . He wished Godfrey hadn't made that joke about its loud tick; because he could not dismiss its truth from his mind.

He mustn't let Pa know that he had been such an idiot about the ticking. Even if the people *had* heard it, that didn't matter. Pa would be hurt. No, he mustn't let Pa know.

Boldly, defiantly, Felix stopped in the middle of the pavement and looked at his watch. In the open air he

could hardly hear its voice. The heat which had been in his cheeks died. His proud sense of possession began to revive. The watch was a good watch; it had a fine regular tick, as a watch *should* have. It was in every way an entirely normal watch. Felix adored it.

And then he caught sight of Estelle, walking with another girl, not a dozen yards in front of him. The girls were arm in arm. They both looked charming. Estelle wore the grey cloth coat she had donned the previous evening over her pearly muslin dress. Should he? What pleasure was within his reach. What pleasure, and what pride! But a moment later Felix saw that they were not alone, for a tall man—a stranger to him—came out of a sweetstuff shop and joined them. All three walked on together.

Felix stood abruptly still in the middle of the pavement. His watch seemed to have developed a double tick. The second was the beating of his heart.

iii

A week later the Howells, Estelle, and Felix went together to the gallery of the Crouch End Opera House to see a performance of "Princess Ida." As it was a Friday evening the gallery was not full, and so they were not crushed together. Instead, they sat at ease in the middle of the third row, all thrillingly expectant, their heads close together over the programme. It was hot; and the big dome of the theatre looked foggy owing to the dust which obscured the central cluster of lights in it. By craning, they could look down into the twilight stalls, and see attendants with astoundingly-coiffed hair, swiftly tiptoeing between the rows of stalls, followed by cow-like herds of people. The sharp dumps which reverberated were the noises made by the tip-up seats as they were

tipped-down. The atmosphere was hushed and filled with the echoes of emptiness, but there was also a quiver of excitement which seemed to thrive upon the inextinguishable draughts of the theatre. Felix, sitting between Bess and Estelle, was in a state of joy such as he had not known for years. It was a most rare pleasure. The pleasure was increased as the house filled and the buzz of voices became a roar. And when, after the unusually short prelude, the curtain rose upon that crowded and resplendent scene in which the courtiers of King Hildebrand search the horizon for Gama and his daughter, he was trembling.

All the old-fashioned jokes and puns, the ridicule of intellectualism in women, meant much less to Felix than the music, so full of melodies and parodies, and very much less than the ridiculousness of the whole conception. And when the three brothers of Princess Ida sang:

“Our interests we would not press
With chatter;
Three hulking brothers more or less
Don't matter.
If you'd pooh-pooh this monarch's plan,
Pooh-pooh it;
But when he says he'll hang a man
He'll do it.
Yes, yes, yes. Devil doubt he'll do it.”

Felix was so moved that the tears were in his eyes. He scorned himself for weakness; but the wit, the modesty, and the common-sense of these three warriors combined to make something which meant more to Felix than anything outside his own affections. It was as though he praised God for the gift of nonsense to a suffering world. He was happy.

In the interval, while they munched chocolate, being all moist with the heat of the rising stale air, but flushed and

jubilant, he could see how delicate Estelle's colouring was. He could see her little ear, and the grace of her neck when she moved to jerk her hair back. He did not consciously see the details of her attractiveness, as he would have done a few years later; he was only beatifically aware of her tender charm. Felix had the same sense of Estelle as he would have had of any soft, gentle, young thing—a kitten or a puppy or a lamb, very warm and limp at being roused from curly sleep. She was so slender, and her cheeks so pure, that she was like the dear little dog that was found inside a nut in the fairy story. He was filled with exulting pleasure at being beside her, so that he hardly felt Bess's elbow in his ribs as she leant across to talk to the others.

"But I didn't think you *could* be married when you were one," said Estelle, in rather bewildered tones. "How could you say 'I will'?"

"Somebody says it for you," explained Bess. "It's called a morganatic marriage. Isn't old King What's-his-name good!"

Estelle gave a jocular shudder.

"Disagreeable man!" she laughed. Her bright eyes seemed to come right into Felix's eyes. They were of the most exquisite blue; not magnetic, but limpid.

"Could you hear the words about the rum-tum-tum of a military drum?" asked Molly, with her mouth full. "Fine, weren't they! You liking it, Felix?"

"Beautiful!" he cried. They all laughed at his tone, and his ardent face. Bess thought "He is a nice boy." And Estelle thought "What long lashes he's got."

Then the curtain went up again, and their pleasure was renewed. Felix could feel Estelle's arm ever so slightly resting against his own.

At the end of the opera they all came out into the fresh night air, and as it was not half-past ten the party walked

home, arm in arm, over Crouch Hill and down towards Finsbury Park. They talked and laughed, and the girls and Felix sang. Jack was too much of a boy to sing. And when the Howells, after warm "good-nights," reached the road at which they turned off, Felix was alone with Estelle. Jack went with his sisters (who would have been quite ready to exchange him for Felix) because it was against common-sense that he should do otherwise. Jack was one of the many martyrs to common-sense.

Alone in the shuttered street, under a moon in its last quarter. It was like a dream. They walked onward in the pale light and amid the deep shadows that were cast short about them. The road was nearly empty: only solitary black figures flitted into sight and out of it again. The moon looked very high and small above, and when they looked up at it they bumped together, laughing a little. It was amusing; but the face of the moon was a mystery.

"Won't you take my arm again?" shyly asked Felix, after a moment.

Estelle moved away from him.

"I'd rather not," she said, with prim virtue.

"But you did just now."

"That was different. . . . They were all there. . . . I'd rather not. Hasn't it been a lovely evening?"

"Glorious. I shan't forget it—ever."

"No," agreed Estelle. "One doesn't forget these sort of evenings, do they?"

Felix agreed that one didn't. But he was too chagrined to do much more than be depressed by her change from light-hearted gaiety to cold politeness. His spirits had been ringing the bell; and now they were falling again. His heart was so warm and kind and loving that he could

not bear to be rebuffed. Felix was not used to rebuff. It discouraged him out of all proportion to its purpose.

"Did you hear my watch ticking?" he demanded, as a diversion, and to hide his wound. She had not done so. He was incredulous. "Why, it's got a most terrible great tick. They joke at the office about it. Everybody teases me. They all put their fingers in their ears when I come in."

"That's very rude of them," said Estelle censoriously.

"It's only in fun," explained Felix, but with a lame sense that his explanation was a stone cast at a cloud. He looked ahead, chilled by her maidenly manner. She was no longer the happy little girl of the evening, but somebody very sedate, who spoke with care. When they had all been laughing she had forgotten all primness; now she was primness itself. Ah! She was shy! But then, so was Felix. A silence fell upon them.

In that silence they reached the road in which Estelle lived, and the forbidding house. She gave him a limp, unresponsive hand; but when he spoke, still holding the hand, she did not withdraw it or make any movement to do so.

"Are you likely to be out tomorrow afternoon?" he boldly asked.

"Er . . . yes," answered Estelle, upon a rising, maidenly note of hesitation.

"In the Park?" A nod. "About three? Near the garden?" Another nod; a quick withdrawal of the hand and a backing away into the shadow of her own gate; a dismissal.

"Good-night, Felix."

He walked home in the moonlight, high above the earth, looking down upon less happy mortal creatures with sublime compassion.

iv

The next morning Pa did not get up to breakfast; and Felix protested at having his breakfast alone.

"Can't have *this* sort of thing," he cried. "Malinger-ing. Isn't he well, Ma?"

Ma shook her head.

"Not *very* well, old chap," she said. "He's going to get up later and go to town; but I thought he might stay in bed a little."

Felix, quick to catch the sobriety of her tone, looked sharply at Ma. She was turned away from him. There was something in her attitude, something of weariness or discouragement, that was agitating. He left his chair and put his arm round her shoulders.

"Ill?" he asked urgently. "Serious?"

"We hope not. I'm afraid he *is*. But we mustn't worry too much. . . . He went to a doctor yesterday——"

"A doctor? You never told me!" It was reproachful.

"We didn't know. . . . It wasn't necessary to alarm you. The doctor doesn't know what's the matter——"

"Oh, dear!" murmured Felix, apprehensively. "That sounds bad." Anything, he felt, was better than obscurity. It could be endured if one could face it. But if the doctor could not understand. . . .

"I expect he's just run down. You know what doctors are"—it was her favourite disbelief—"They can't tell what's the matter. They don't *know*. They only experiment. He hasn't been very well lately, you know. Perhaps he wants a change. He doesn't get much change."

Ma was obviously forcing her cheerfulness. She was gravely troubled. She was not telling Felix all that the doctor had said. He had some inkling of that, and went back to his seat, very thoughtful. Somehow he had never

thought of Pa being ill. Pa's round face was not one to be associated with illness. And yet, if Ma was alarmed, this must be more than a slight illness. He had risen in such a sparkling mood from sweet dreams of Estelle, and with such an expectant joy in his coming meeting with her, that this faint suggestion of calamity impressed him the more disastrously.

In the bedroom, whither he went before leaving the flat, he saw Pa lying on his back. The venetian blind was still lowered to the middle of the window, so as to shade the bed from the morning sun; and the room was thus in partial shadow. It was a very bare room, the floor stained with oak varnish, and a small piece of green carpet its sole covering. Besides the bed, and some pictures upon the walls, the only furnishings were a wash-stand, a chest-of-drawers, a single wooden chair and a table upon which stood some of the implements of Pa's craft. It was a poor room, and the bedstead was a cheap iron one which had been enamelled a hideous yellowish brown. Pa lay breathing rather heavily. In the semi-darkness his face looked quite grey; and Felix experienced a chill of horror.

"Hullo, Mahlcolm," he whispered. There came a gasping response.

"Hullo, Felix." A groping hand came out of the bed. Felix gripped it.

"Howjer feel? Better?"

"I'm not ill," came indignantly from Pa. "Who says I'm ill? I'm not!"

"No, I can see," retorted Felix, impudently. "Just you get up and leave off shamming."

Pa grinned. He raised his head from the pillow.

"What's the time?" he asked.

"Phew!" Felix jumped up. "Have to run. You're *going* to get up, aren't you? I mean, you don't *really* feel

ill?" He held the door for an instant; then closed it quietly and went into the next room, where Godfrey lay asleep. "Up, Timothy, up!" he cried; and thoughtfully drew the bedclothes from about the peaceful body of his brother. That body was comfortably curled as if in a hollow of the bed. With two giant strides Felix was safe, and he immediately set out for Messrs. Nimmodyne's Advertising Agency.

Nevertheless, his mood was changed. He was pre-occupied. Disaster of some sort hung in the air. He did not know from what direction it was to come; but his heart was inexplicably heavy.

v

All through that morning Felix felt himself becoming more and more depressed, and he tried in vain to shake off the dread which had seized him. If Pa were ill, what? Felix shuddered. And yet it seemed as though this were not the only thing that pressed like ice upon his heart. He could not understand. How mysterious everything was, and how unaccountable were one's own feelings.

"It's nothing; it's nothing," Felix kept telling himself, and at last, as he sat addressing envelopes, he fell into a dream. The grimy office was not there: it had been annihilated. He was again in moonlight. . . . Real life was a dream; the horrid incidents that seemed to mean so much were fantasies.

"Come along, Felix. Call out the names of those people!" cried Miss Slowcomb. "You seem half-asleep this morning."

"I *am* half-asleep," he answered, leaping into suaveness. "It's all the result of going to the theatre."

"Oh, oh!" rallied Miss Slowcomb. "The morning after the night before!"

"What you know about that, Miss Slowcomb," said Felix, gravely, "I can't imagine."

"Be quiet, Felix!" Miss Slowcomb was most indignant. "Don't be cheeky."

She rattled her bangles, much pleased by the notion that she knew the slang terms of the fast life.

vi

When he reached home, Felix found that Pa had been to London and had come back again. Pa was apparently divided in his mind between the attractions of being ill and the need for scouting the notion of illness. He loved being ill, because it brought him rewards. So, for that matter, did Felix. It was only human to love consideration and tit-bits. But Pa had the violent repugnance of all who are not valetudinarian to the thought of disease. And so he was torn between valour and self-pity. It was such a gorgeous treat to him to arouse interest and compassion.

Pa sat in the kitchen, well away from the fire, in an old armchair with cane seat and back. His feet were upon a hassock; but he had rejected a blanket as too invalidish. His round head, which looked Thackerayan owing to the size of Pa's face, lolled back in the chair, and he was re-reading "Lady Audley's Secret." Ma was engaged in cooking, and had a blue apron over her brown dress. Her hair was still a dark brown, but if one looked at the temples there were grey hairs to be seen in a sort of plume.

Presently Godfrey appeared, from the bedroom, his brow thoughtfully furled in an effort of memory, reciting to himself in a whisper:

"And woe to the rider, and woe to the steed,
That falls in front of that mad stampede . . ."

"Lahscah; by Frahnk Desprrez!" cried Felix, recognising the quotation and burlesquing the manner of a third-rate professional reciter.

"You *have* to say it like that!" protested Godfrey. "Little worm."

There was a brief scuffle between them; and at Ma's murmur of warning a break-away. Both boys were breathing hard from their exertions, and laughing. Tip, astonished, watched from his basket, a single paw arrested in mid-air.

"I may say," remarked Felix, at last, with assumed nonchalance, although in fact he was unable any longer to keep the news a secret, "that I am now earning *eight* shillings a week. Got a rise." This meant that his weekly wage had been increased by two shillings. "Got it today—first time."

"Did you *ask* for it?" demanded Godfrey, with affronting definiteness. "Pig."

"Never!" cried Felix. "It's the reward of merit. Does one ask for the Humane Society's medal or the Victoria Cross?"

"In life," retorted Godfrey, uncrushed, "there are neither rewards nor punishments. There are consequences."

vii

And then Felix started out to keep his appointment, his heart singing and his eyes shining. It did not matter that the sky was grey with the London atmosphere or the roads and houses deep-bitten with grime. They seemed to Felix to be radiant because he was radiant. His watch ticked in his pocket; exultation pervaded him. All that depressed fear which he had felt in the morning was gone; he was alert and alive. Ma looked out of the front room window and saw him cross the road whistling. He walked

quickly, with a straight back; his arms swung a little. His cap was cocked. She thought him serious but full of antic mischievousness; a high-spirited, gentle, modest boy who told the truth. Whether she also knew that he was a cunning and indefatigable liar I cannot say. But as Felix was never deceitful, Ma probably knew all about him. Certainly she knew more than he knew himself.

Felix swung along the roads at a great pace. He did not stop for anything. Even when a dog ran up, wagging his tail, Felix gave one friendly pat and no more. He was bound for the trysting-place, and his expectancy ran high. He reached the gardens by a quarter-to-three, so quickly had he walked, and contemplated the decaying flowers with sympathy. They looked so bare and ignominious that they chilled him more than did the sweeping autumnal winds which raced through the gardens and gave a husky whisper to all the trees and the bushes, and made the withered flowers tremble fiercely. But Felix was in a glow; his cheeks were coloured and his hands were tingling. He walked up and down, and round the gardens; and looked at his watch, and at other people who passed. Always he kept an eye clear for the paths along which Estelle might come. Even when three o'clock was forgotten, and a quarter-past, Felix was not troubled or exasperated. He could find excuses and explanations as quickly for others as for himself. He had unshakable trust. He was getting colder, however, and the wind was tempering his enthusiasm.

At a quarter to four Felix knew that she was not coming. There was a sick weight upon his heart and a dryness in his throat. He was humiliated. His lips showed his disappointment, being set so as to betray no grief, and betraying it the more surely. He found excuses—she had been kept; she had misunderstood his directions; she had been forced to stay indoors; she was

ill; all sorts of things might have occurred to prevent her coming;—but his feeling of misery, however staunchly checked, was overpowering. He felt tired and cold, beaten by the wind and numbed by disappointment. Ever and anon, until the dusk fell, he returned to the spot at which they were to have met. Useless. Darkness grew rapidly. The park was closing. Felix trudged homewards. All his joy had gone.

viii

As he walked there came to Felix's mind the temptation to seek Estelle, or at any rate to be near her for an instant. He could not withstand it. The notion even lightened his heart. Some small hint of his earlier gaiety arose; he whistled for a moment—an air which he had recaptured from "Princess Ida." From the direct route home, stopping headlong in his march, he made a *détour* that brought him to the Cornwallis Road. It was a road of tall and shabby basement houses, mostly of four floors, the houses black with the action of the grease-laden atmosphere of the nearer suburbs of London. Every house was like every other house, a mass of grey stucco. The Fergusons', owing to Estelle's method of farewell and his own elation, he would not be able to recognise; but the surroundings were familiar. Felix was excited. With his hands in his overcoat pockets he refused to accept his downcast mood. It was a new adventure. A forlorn hope, but still a hope. Sentiment alone propelled him.

In the darkness, keeping to the further side of the road, Felix walked quickly in the direction of the Fergusons' house. The darkness was now complete, for the moon would not rise for several hours, and there were no stars visible. Only grim clouds, carried by the strengthening wind, hung low. Lamps, recently lighted, made primrose

spots in the murk. He could not see clearly. Everything was shadowed and mysterious. And all the time, as he strode along, Felix was staring across the road, trying to remember the exact position of the house, seeking by the aid of some fire-glow or undrawn blind that picture which was already vivid in his imagination. In vain. The road was without comfort. The blinds of those tall grey houses were drawn, or there were no lights within. All was black.

Felix, dismay reviving, hesitated. The road was a long one; he was lost in it, unable to recollect any guiding memory of the previous night. Only a line of dim buildings and high hedges, sunk into a common colourless haze, was to be seen. Search appeared hopeless. Already his enthusiasm was dying. Again his heart was swelling with disappointment; with distaste for a search little commended by his sensitive judgment. But as he paused Felix seemed with piercing scrutiny in that moment to penetrate the gloom. There, almost immediately opposite to him, nearly hidden amid the web of darkness and shadow, stood two figures. Above them rose a high and enveloping privet hedge. One of the figures, there could be no question, was Estelle; the other, Jack Howell. It was a tragic vision. As quickly as it had come, so it vanished. Felix strained his eyes to no purpose. Where those secret figures had been nothing remained. He turned his back. He had the bitter sense of catastrophe. His cheeks on fire with indignant scorn, Felix reached Seven Sisters Road without once checking his fierce stride. His heart was thumping, and he was quite breathless. The lights of the shops were blurred. But in all this his head was high and his pride ferocious. There was no sense of defeat, but one only of aversion. He was bewildered.

CHAPTER VIII: GROWING PAINS

i

THE Fish lived in some rooms in a street near Grays Inn Road. He was an admirable tailor. His cut was good, his cloths were excellent, and his honesty was above question. The entry to the Fish's abode was dark. Felix stumbled as he climbed the steep and oppressively unlighted stairway. He could see nothing but gloom. And then he reached the Fish's door, and rang the bell, and was received by the Fish himself. It was hard to reconcile the contrast between the cave-like stair and this singular combination of work-room and drawing-room. The apartment was very large, and had long French windows which opened on to a balcony; old-fashioned prim plush-covered furniture was decorated with lace mats and antimacassars; and upon the walls hung fine engravings in polished mahogany frames with gilt slips. Upon a table were little sample-books of cloths; over one chair hung a roughly basted suit. Felix gazed around with wonderment at so singular, so puzzling a mixture of trade and bourgeois comfort; and in doing this he met the Fish's eye, to find that the Fish was meeting his own. In that glance all was spoken. For a first visit Felix had done very well. He had impressed the Fish.

The Fish was a small man, whose Jewish blood was shown less in physiognomy than in the melting softness of his eyes. He was moderately dark, very lean, thin-haired, somewhat round-shouldered, very gentle in manner; and his clothes were shabby. He did not show by

the least sign that what he was doing hung a millstone round his customer's neck or risked his own loss of cloth, and work, and machinist's wages. He was a poor man's tailor, working upon the tally system. One glance was enough for him, and he had made so much money that he could almost afford to make bad debts. It was for Felix, who would still be paying installments for his suit in six months' time, that the risks of this meeting were untold.

The Fish spoke continuously—a sort of half-breathed chatter of husky inquiry, compliment, and communication; and as he spoke he was measuring and making notes upon a piece of paper as quickly and efficiently as a silent man could have done. All the time he was talking, the Fish was estimating character. Long experience had taught him a great deal about it. He had not waited outside places of business to waylay debtors, had not been tricked by decoys and stampedes, had not in the end with suave triumph collected eighty per cent of his accounts, without mastering his own business.

"How did your brother's performance go the other night?" he asked. "I was so pleased that he had got other engagements. It is the beginning that's always so hard. He didn't dry up, I hope?"

"No," said Felix. "He didn't dry up. He got on very well."

"I'm so glad," commended the Fish, with the smallest possible lisp. "He'll be coming to me again, I expect. A broadcloth overcoat with an astrakhan collar!" He laughed a little, and Felix grinned. He had the picture of Godfrey in his first dress-suit, of Mr. Herring's manufacture; and Godfrey's worried expression when he thought of his debt; and the relief which accompanied news that Godfrey had obtained other engagements to recite "Lasca" and its kindred at further smoking-

concerts. Well, it was all income! The Hunters needed income!

"And your father. So sorry to hear he was in the hospital. I'm afraid there's no chance of *his* wanting any clothes just yet awhile. Later on, of course; later on . . ."

"Yes, later on," agreed Felix, with a sinking heart.

The Fish knelt down and measured the knee and ankle.

"Clothes are a great test," he said in his muffled voice. "When I see a man with a coat that hangs away at the sides, or whose trousers bag at the knee, it conveys a great deal to me."

"I'm afraid mine do those things," Felix replied, with a smile.

"Oh, but not in the way I was mentioning," said the Fish, standing upright again. "Now the cuff, for example: you see yours is not at all frayed on the inside; whereas the cuffs of some men are astonishingly worn. Trade, I suppose . . . thirty-five . . . has something to do with it. The way in which the clothes are used. . . . Possibly you've read those detective stories that have been coming out in 'The Strand Magazine' . . . what's the man's name? Mr. Sherlock Holmes. . . . There's a great deal more in his methods than some people think for. A *great* deal. By the way—yes, that's all, I think; thank you. . . . Are you interested in books? I've just been reading some of the funniest things I've ever met with. They're not *meant* to be funny, you understand—or so it seems to me—but I've been reading them aloud on Sundays to Mrs. Herring, and we've had *many* a hearty laugh over them. They're plays. I'll show you the book before you go. . . . I've never read anything so unconsciously comic in all my life. I can't imagine how they got into the library at all. . . . Oh, yes; I got them out of the public library here. Did you think I

would buy them? If I were to buy all the books I read I should have no room to breathe. My wife and I are great readers—very great readers. And that's how I came across these plays. . . . They were always 'in,' d'you see. . . . Now, what about the cloth? You ought really to see the patterns in daylight. Will you take them? And send me a note? Yes, laugh! I should think I've laughed. . . . I wish you'd read them, Mr. Hunter, and tell me if you think the man's mad or just . . . One minute; the book's in the next room. . . ."

The Fish disappeared for a moment. Felix heard him speaking and laughing in the next room; and then he returned with a book in his hand. It was about the size of an ordinary novel, and was bound in a brownish cloth.

"There!" cried the laughing Fish. "That's it. And if you'll promise faithfully to bring it back when you come to be fitted, you may have the loan of it. You'll forget your father's illness, and these horrible Boers. . . ." He laughed again.

Felix took the book, and opened it. Upon the title-page was a name he did not know.

"Henrik Ibsen," he read.

ii

The book contained "The League of Youth" and "Pillars of Society," and the Hunters read these plays at top speed. By the time Felix carried his suit away from the Fish the boys were Ibsen mad. They had read half-a-dozen volumes of the plays. Godfrey had seen himself as most of the male persons in the casts, and could walk about a room with the book in his hand, dropping into position and taking their parts. He had never been so affected by any literature. As for Felix, he was captured by "The Wild Duck." He sat for whole evenings

reading and re-reading this play, until the characters in it were his companions. He knew them. He so imagined them that they had objective reality for him. He made no attempt to draw their faces; but he made sketches of the scenes in which they lived, and showed in his sketches the persons as it seemed to him they must be standing in relation to one another. He could hear their voices, feel their emotions, see their gestures. The reading of this play was a tremendous event in his life, in his mental and emotional experience. It had even a practical influence upon his professional career. From "The Wild Duck" arose definitely that interest in stage settings which has provided Felix with one of his most successful sidelines as a decorative craftsman.

Felix was at this time fifteen. Pa was in a hospital in Lincoln's Inn Fields, wearing a red flannel jacket, coughing and growing more and more like a shadow, the marvel of medical students, who had never met with so baffling and absorbing a liver as his was. They gathered around his bed in great numbers, and, because he was so interesting to them, were friendly with Pa. They did not actually pat his shoulder, but the general manner towards him was such that Pa became conceited about his intestines. If Ma and Godfrey and Felix, visiting him upon the Sundays, and awed to whispers by their surroundings, the smell of the ward, the picturesque red jackets of the patients, the crowds of other poor visitors, had allowed Pa to repeat all that he had gleaned about his inside from the students, their knowledge of morbid anatomy would have become astounding. They were unfortunately too sensitive to reap the benefit of this opportunity. Pa, looking transparent in his pallor, and ghastly in his shrunken size, could only cough and venture hints about his person. He remained magically cheerful.

All round the ward were other miracles of disease—

men with horrible habits and painful complaints. It was fascinating and terrifying to see their neatness, their little red jackets, the groups of dutiful or affectionate visitors about them. Some were so poor and forlorn that they had no visitors; others had visitors in excess of the number allowed, who joked the sisters about not being there, about being very small. . . . Some groups chattered volubly to the patients; some talked among themselves, ignoring the patients; some made no attempt at all to speak, but sat very dispiritedly waiting for the visiting hour to elapse. At Pa's bedside there was always animation, so that he was proud to see his family and to know that he was envied by his neighbours. He even made sallies of wit upon his own account. The high spirits of the Hunters seemed to be compatible with the most serious concern. They were not consciously brave, but rose to the occasion as if in spite of their fears.

During Pa's absence from home, if the family at 266a Flemington Road was reduced in size, its income also was reduced. But Godfrey's recitations, delivered at smoking concerts and masonic dinners in the Fish's evening suit, had begun a good work; and Godfrey was revealing other gifts. He had written for himself a couple of humorous monologues, not based upon those of Charles Pond, of whom he had never heard, but resembling them in manner. One of these described a journey in an omnibus, and gave Godfrey an opportunity for the mimicry of various types; the other did the same sort of thing for types to be seen along the front at Brighton or any other popular seaside town. The monologues were short, amusing, and easily appreciated. They showed Godfrey to be a natural droll, and, reinforced by very whimsical delivery, were highly successful. Godfrey stood almost still in delivering the monologues, but his quick, slim hands, and the instinctive use of eyes and

brows and an irresistibly mobile mouth, emphasised his own humorous observation to a precise point. Even Felix, familiar as he became with the monologues through his enforced presence at their rehearsal, found them excellent. They were at this moment the mainstay of the family. They had paid for the dress-suit. They had paid for the accessories of the dress-suit. Godfrey's principal expense at this point was in dress-shirts, collars, and ties; and Ma came into the picture once more with new and—to any outsider—amazing skill as a laundress.

Felix would have been glad to find upon his own account a means of increasing the family revenue. He was almost, he felt, a drone. He worked hard at his drawings in the evenings and during the week-ends, and carried some of them to the offices of illustrated papers; but without success. His outlay in Bristol board and Indian ink was not justified. He was altogether too juvenile for such ambitious work. He needed lessons, he needed models, he needed experience and knowledge. None of these things could be obtained without money. In vain did he draw Ma over and over again, until her bones cracked from the strain of standing so long in one position. He became ashamed to ask her to pose for him, so resignedly unprotesting was her assent. She would become petrified in the middle of housework in order that Felix might draw her; but she was glad to resume her work when the sketch was finished. In vain, going farther afield, did Felix make attempts without their knowledge to draw those who drowsed upon seats in Finsbury Park or elsewhere. The sedentary human being, he found, is the most self-conscious of God's creatures; and is at once aware of any strict glance of observation. The hurried strokes were often useless and meaningless when Felix came later to examine them. And he was hindered constantly by ignorance. He simply did

not know how human beings were made, how they stood or ran, or disposed themselves when seated. Moreover, the contemplation of pictures by great artists bored and terrified him. Most of them were such as he did not seek to emulate: those by the artists he most admired were a discouragement to him.

"How did he *know*?" the poor boy would demand. "Damn it, I shall never know!"

There were curious streaks in Felix which at this time complicated his effort. The instinctive draughtsman, absorbed in questions of light and shade, of truth and decorative beauty, at times conquered all other Felixes whatsoever. He would gaze at a drawing of Rembrandt's almost with ecstatic emotion. All his life, Felix has been a lover of Rembrandt. It is the obvious thing to say of him. But on the other hand the mystical religious strain, so absent from any of his actual work that those who know only his work will laugh at the notion, was so strong that he was at this time capable of being overwhelmed by the softness and sweetness of many ancient pictures of mystical themes. When once he had seen reproductions of Dürer's work, Felix had instant clarification. It was as if he had attained direct contact, of the most intimate spiritual kind, with his own soul. But it is one thing to receive spiritual or æsthetic clarification, to be inspired by the sense of true beauty; and it is another thing entirely to be able to express one's conceptions. Felix has always been weak in invention; his critics, who after all understand very little of a man's genuine limitations, and grope for some reason for their own inability to be satisfied, have said "in imagination," but I think wrongly. His imagination has always been, if not intense, quite pure. It is extraordinarily free, in fact, from alloy. It is an intimate and a pervasive imagination. But he has no nobility or energy of invention, and it is this gift

which is generally overvalued by critics and by them called by the other name. And just as a weakness led him to take up that branch of art in which the inspiration of the moment has most chance of being given an air of permanence, so the same weakness, which is the hatred of taking pains, has always led him to plan his work ineffectively. Men of much smaller natural talent, who are more ambitious both in themselves and in their conceptions, have always been ranked higher than Felix, and I suppose will continue to be so ranked. Nevertheless it is a mistake. When he will take the trouble to plan, he is at his best. When he does not take this trouble, too much strain is thrown upon his imaginative power, with the result that it seems feebler and colder than in fact it is.

The weakness was already present at the beginning of Felix's career. He was active and hard-working by fits; but he would always be ingenious rather than laborious. Considering his later reputation as "the industrious apprentice," this is a singular fact. And at the time when he was trying hard to make a start as an artist, ingenuity was useless. One cannot be a wit unless, below the mental play, there is deep experience. He had not the basis of knowledge which would have given ingenuity its chance. He was discouraged. Money was a necessity if he were to do anything at all—to contribute his share to the family support and to make any progress as an artist;—and he must somehow obtain it. There seemed to be only one way, and that was by getting a higher wage from Messrs. Nimmodyne's Advertising Agency. And that task was as hard as it would be to get butter from a dog's mouth. The mere thought of it made Felix grimace. He could see the shabby office, and Mr. Peppin's throat-clearing disgust, and Mr. Parsons's consternation. He knew that it was impossible. Nevertheless, the mind of Felix was at grips with necessity. Forcing his determination to

conquer his fear, he waited until one day when Miss Slowcomb was at lunch, and when, owing to the absence of Mr. Bowman and Mr. Peppin, Mr. Parsons was alone in the inner room. He planned an approach. He moved across the outer office, hesitating, his little fresh face almost white with anxiety, the pupils of his eyes enlarged until they dwarfed the irises. The ordeal seemed suddenly too great. Felix shrank away from it in terror. And then, with colour sweeping his cheeks, he stepped forward, opened the door of the inner room, and stood before the big, stamping Mr. Parsons, who sat mildly at his desk, his head on his hand, frowning gloomily at some accounts which lay there. This room was only a little less bare and hideous than the outer office, the windows as dirty; and there were three knee-hole desks in it, of which only that of Mr. Parsons had a roll top. It was not the private room of a very successful firm.

"Mr. Parsons," said Felix, halting before the giant, and looking down with a sort of shrinking boldness at the inscrutable pince-nez and the black moustache and the brown, vigorous face of his employer. It was not a hard face; but neither was it a cordial one. Felix hesitated again. He saw the frown deepen, saw the little eyes shoot up in doubt and shrewd assessment, almost lost his head at the consciousness of his own revealed clumsiness and stupidity.

"Felix!" replied Mr. Parsons, abstracted but mocking. The eyes were fixed now, hard and searching. There was no kindness at all in them; only a cynical detachment, as though shabbiness, a home-made tie, a worn collar, had been noted with amused contempt. But Mr. Parsons may already have known the object of this solitary, hesitating presence, and his manner may thus have been immediately self-protective.

"My father's dying. He's in hospital. I *must* have

some more money. Could you possibly raise my wages?" Felix had blurted out his demand. He was breathless; his heart was fluttering; it was a really painful moment—the only occasion in his life upon which Felix asked for an increase of payment, and for that reason immeasurably distasteful.

"Oh, I say!" growled Mr. Parsons. He blinked rapidly, and moved his hands, and then turned sharply away, as he would have done from a woman trying to sell him lucky white heather. His teeth met and showed, and his lips drew away from them in an expression of embarrassed resentment. "Yes, I'm . . . I'm sorry to hear that . . . sorry to hear that. . . . What's the matter with him? Serious, is it? Dying, you say—I don't expect it's as bad as that, eh? Really? Hm . . ." Mr. Parsons shook his head, and appeared to groan. A prolonged grunt sounded from his throat. Only his eyes moved quickly. "As to . . . I don't know about giving you a rise, Felix. I don't know about that. See, it's a question . . . a question. . . . You're a clever kid, I know; but I don't see. . . . However, I'll think about it. I'll let you know—later. . . ." He cleared his throat, frowning again.

Felix felt his heart sinking. The trembling had gone; but he was even more sensitive. The die was cast. If he had failed . . .

"I could do . . . much more useful work . . ." he ventured. "Much more useful work than I do now."

"You could do . . ." As they were alone, Mr. Parsons could be candid. "You could do most of the work I do myself, Felix. That's the truth of it. At least, you think you could. And I think so, too. That's not the point. We don't want anybody to do my work. *Got* someone. See what I mean?"

Felix saw. They wanted an office boy. There was a

silence, during which both were uncomfortable. Felix stood irresolute.

"I'll think it over," repeated Mr. Parsons, rising from his chair and towering above his victim. Felix knew that he had failed. It was like a blow. He turned away as quickly as Mr. Parsons had done. His cheeks were burned by a hot flush of mortification. He knew that Mr. Parsons had not the smallest intention of raising his wages, that the promise was a prevarication. His jaw was set. Perspiration gathered around his eyes,—the nearest approach to tears that a boy of fifteen could permit himself. Eight shillings a week was as much as Nimmodyne's Advertising Agency would ever pay him. It was over. There was nothing more to be done here.

iii

The next step which Felix took was to tell Mr. Cracken of his plight. He perhaps counted upon some help; but if he did this Felix was very quickly disappointed, for Mr. Cracken was not of those who maintain wells of sympathy for the unfortunate.

"Ah, now!" said this spirited philosopher. "The best thing that could have happened to you. You want waking up. Get another job. A smart lad like you ought to get in anywhere. Anywhere. No trouble about that. It's just a question of where you *want* to go. Let me think. . . ." Mr. Cracken pretended to think. His head sank to his raised hand. Felix watched him breathlessly. The sharp little rosy face, spiked upon each side with its moustache which made Felix think Mr. Cracken must look like a double swordfish, was momentarily serious. Mr. Cracken thought, silhouetted against the dusty window. Then his hands fell, and were propelled deep into his trousers pockets. His feet shot out, and he slid low

in his chair. Musingly, he repeated "Ah," and at last: "Perseverance is the great thing, Felix."

"I always thought it was opportunity," retorted Felix, disillusioned.

Mr. Cracken stared in front of him, still apparently deep in thought, and as if reflecting upon the contrast between perseverance and opportunity. Finally, rather subdued, he answered:

"A *fine* thing, Felix; not the great one. Will. Determination."

"Two pounds a week." Felix flicked at Mr. Cracken his supposed salary.

"Ah, that's what my wife thinks. At least, whether she thinks it or not . . . It wouldn't do to tell your wife everything. Well, you know for yourself. Now, my wife . . . she's mad to buy the house. Mad on it, she is. What for? Mark my words, Felix; never buy a house while you can rent one. Let the other man pay the repairs. Here's the ball-cock gone wrong, or the roof leaks, or the gate's off its hinges. . . . The landlord's got to do that. And yet people are crazy to buy. It's one of the delusions of our day. Own your own house; own your own . . . it's all my eye."

Felix nodded sympathetically. He even contributed to the diversion.

"The man who rents the bottom flat next door to us has a board out," he said, "Why pay rent?" He's an agent for a building society."

"He's a wise man. After all, it's a fair question. 'Why pay rent?' Damned if I can answer it. Can you?"

Mr. Cracken made a rustling with his papers, and sat upright. The indication was that he was too busy to speak further. After a moment's consideration Felix bade him good-night, and went home, frowning thoughtfully.

iv

"Felix," said Mr. Parsons, hurriedly, in passing, towards the end of the week, "come in here, will you?"

Felix followed Mr. Parsons to the inner room, and found him standing by the window and looking down towards the rat-haunted yard in the basement. He closed the door and waited. They were alone in the shabby room, and the desks of Mr. Peppin and Mr. Bowman were locked and superficially tidy. Felix looked about him at the grime, but he saw none of it. All he saw was Mr. Parsons's embarrassment, his unscrupulous hostility to those who desired change of any kind. Suddenly Mr. Parsons turned, looking down upon Felix with a sternness almost alarming. He began to speak quickly, peremptorily. He said that the firm could not afford to pay Felix more than his present salary of eight shillings a week. It would not do, he said. It was a question of vital economics. They could get any number of boys to work for eight shillings a week. Any number. Of course, he understood Felix's wish for more money, and he was sorry to disappoint him; but if Felix kept on pegging away perhaps something would turn up in time. One never knew when a fresh opening might not arise in such an office as theirs. And when Felix was older, and could be of more value to the firm, of course he would reap the benefit of present moderation. It was all for the best—a little self-discipline. . . . The great thing was to stick to work, and not be in too great a hurry. Some boys were in too great a hurry, like the hare in the fable. . . . Felix was only a boy, and it would be some time yet before he could hope to earn . . .

Felix was not listening. Mr. Parsons's voice seemed to roll on, echoing like the voice of one who talked into a jug, hollow and unreal. He knew that Mr. Parsons

was not thinking, that he was just saying what came to the tip of his tongue; and he was indignant. Felix despised Mr. Parsons for not saying outright: "We're mean; we're not going to help you; we don't think you're worth more; we don't believe you'll get more from anybody. . . . As for your father, the sooner he's dead the better. . . ." That was what he meant, wasn't it?

"Thank you," said Felix, contempt hidden in his voice of politeness. "I'm sure you'd do it if you could. I see I oughtn't to have asked . . ."

He checked Mr. Parsons with true MacNaughtan arrogance. So had Grumps and Ma upon many occasions shown pride—unwise and shameworthy pride—in face of ungenerosity; and shown it with an accepting courtesy which barely masked murderous anger. Felix was the son of his mother. His scorn, his impatience of excuse, his refusal to plead or amend, overwhelmed him. To Mr. Parsons such restrained behaviour was the occasion of relief and shame. He could not meet the eye of one so proud. But of course Felix got nothing, with the exception of respect, from Mr. Parsons. He passed on to the next stage in his affairs with something that resembled imperturbability. Nevertheless, he had the feeling that his stomach had turned to water.

v

The sequel to this agitating request and refusal, which was discussed in detail by the partners in the firm, was a further annoyance for Nimmodyne's Advertising Agency. They received one morning a letter from the famous Brinksons—they had no more than that name upon their notepaper—who advertised themselves as the greatest advertising agents in London. The letter said:

"Dear Sirs. Mr. Felix Hunter has applied to us for the position of junior assistant, and has referred us to you as his present employers. We shall be glad to know if you have found him honest, punctual, and diligent in his duties while in your employ, and if there is any reason why we should not engage him. We enclose stamped envelope for your reply, and we are, dear sirs, etc."

The letter was a shock to Mr. Parsons. Upon opening it he swore, threw the envelope to the floor, stooped to pick it up again, and flushed with the exertion. Then he shouted. Felix, who that morning had placed Mr. Parsons's letters upon the pull-out shelf of his desk, and who had seen upon one of the envelopes the impressive name of Brinksons, came in answer to the call. He was trembling, but his chin was up, and he remained apparently calm while Mr. Parsons fiercely protested against the outrage, the disloyalty.

"I asked you . . . I explained I *must* have more money," stammered Felix. "You refused."

"I don't care if I *did* refuse."

"What else was I to do?" pleaded Felix.

Mr. Parsons remained standing and glowering down upon this shrinking cause of annoyance. He seemed to grow up to the ceiling in his rage.

"To go *there!*" he shouted.

"I had to go somewhere," replied Felix.

"I don't see why," grumbled Mr. Parsons. "Weren't you happy here?"

"It's simply a question of money."

Mr. Parsons made a noise that sounded like a snarl.

"You won't like it," he said, threateningly. "All business there. No 'go as you please,' you know. Hard work all the time. No doing as you like."

"With Mr. Peppin here there's very little of that in this office," Felix assured him.

"Eh?" Mr. Parsons stared. He remained eyeing Felix for a moment, and then shrugged his shoulders. He was not used to rational conversations with small boys. Finally he waved his arm. "All right," he said. "Go your own way to the devil. But I'm angry with you."

"I wish you weren't," answered Felix, respectfully. "You oughtn't to be."

He withdrew, very excited, but pleausurably excited. Rather a compliment, Mr. Parsons's anger, he thought. And yet there was no question of his staying. . . . It was a problem. It was one he has never solved, although it has been recurrent in his life. When once he has declared an intention, I believe few people have had any expectation that they will make him do something else instead. How singular if they should all have over-rated Felix's firmness!

Mr. Parsons, recovering his temper, and growing very ashamed of himself, called Miss Slowcomb.

"Take this letter," he said, curtly: "Dear Sirs. We are in receipt of your letter . . . er . . . No. Dear Sirs. In reply to your letter, er . . ."

The letter, in its dictation and revision, occupied Mr. Parsons for half-an-hour. Through its medium, Miss Slowcomb learned the thrilling news. She typed the letter carefully, from personal pride and a sense of responsibility to the firm, which made her realise that Brinksons must not be able to ridicule anything which related to Nimmodyne's.

"I think you might have told me, Felix," she remarked, as she showed him Mr. Parsons's handsome effort upon the subject of his own qualities.

"What a jewel I am!" he ejaculated, extraordinarily happy. His eyes were brilliant as he handed the letter back. "The point is, how is it I'm being allowed to go? Jolly disinterested of the old firm!"

"Felix," repeated Miss Slowcomb. "I think you might have told me. I can't say I blame you for what you've done. I think you're doing right. You *ought* to get on. It's your duty. Sometimes I think *I'll* . . . I get so wahld with Mr. Cracken. Mr. Peppin . . . At least, I" The rambling monologue ceased. An urgent note came into her voice. "I wonder who'll get my chocolate éclairs. Oh, Felix! Supposing we get a *horrid* boy!" She was suddenly in despair.

"You'll always be able to *think* of me," Felix replied, consolingly. "To think what you've lost. After all, it's better to have loved and lost than never——"

"Felix!" bridled Miss Slowcomb.

vi

Brinksons were known far and wide. They sought to combine the reserve and dignity of a firm of crusted family solicitors with the brisk efficiency of an up-to-date advertising firm. Their office was therefore full of anomalies. Their letters were typed, certainly, and well typed; but they were still copied by means of the hand press. Letters received were filed, but in pigeon-holes, and at the end of each year the contents of the pigeon-holes were gathered into brown-paper parcels which split, and from which odd letters were frequently abstracted without notification or return. The files were all ante-diluvian; the book-keeping elaborate but old-fashioned; wages were low; enterprise in members of the staff was discouraged; dread of "American methods" everywhere provoked feebleness and mediocrity.

"Be busy; be courteous; but take time. Above all, take time. It looks well. It *looks* as if we were busy, and as if we were thorough." So said the original Brinkson, who should have been a solicitor. He was loyally obeyed.

In spite of this, Felix felt Nimmodynes to be washed out by Brinksons. He was impressed by his new employers. They had a large and imposing office in the neighbourhood of Fleet Street, and at a first glimpse the office was terrifyingly smart. One entered a small cubicle marked "Inquiries," and pressed an electric bell. Instantly a sliding window revealed the face of a sharp junior who asked one's name and business, disappeared, and came promptly back again, either to the window or to a door. Another cubicle was marked "Waiting Room." This was not like the waiting-rooms of publishers, in which one may sometimes find half-eaten fragments of bread and butter, presumably the meal of a ravenous and forgotten author; but was clean and highly polished. The rest of the office was a mystery behind frosted glass.

The tapping of typewriters, the sound of strange and ungenial voices, a general air of unsocial briskness, chilled Felix. It was all different from the casualness of Nimmodynes, harder, less friendly, less personal. His heart ached a little. With difficulty he kept his head. What would the future show? Still, he was stirred by hopeful excitement. Inside the frosted glass he discovered a multitude of cubicles. In each of these, unhealthily small and windless, worked a human being or several human beings. A large staff busied itself in this way with the details of advertising. No more were there long, lazy conversations over tea. No longer had Felix the sense of ease with his employers which he had enjoyed at Nimmodyne's. What Nimmodyne's had done carelessly but as a family in two rooms, Brinksons did upon a much larger scale, and as a most imperfect piece of mechanism, in twenty or thirty cubicles. So much for Utopias.

Felix found himself quartered in a rather large cubicle with the man who had engaged him and a middle-aged typist called Miss Berridge—a grey-haired, competent

woman who could have managed the business with ease if she had possessed the smallest initiative. As it was, she was of the greatest value to Mr. Dalton as a lieutenant and to Felix as instructor. She was the sort of person who knows where everything is kept, and can find it when everybody else has looked in vain. But she was not therefore offensive. Her loyalty, in fact, was an object-lesson to Felix. It awed him. Miss Berridge was Mr. Dalton's guardian angel. She protected him from the consequences of his own mistakes; she endured his irascibility; she knew at once where all sorts of lost designs, files, fragments of copy, pen-nibs, letters, memoranda, rulers, books, and information might be found. Felix had never known anybody like her. She was the model secretary. How different, he felt, from Miss Slowcomb.

And yet he thought of Miss Slowcomb—foolish, dishonest, treacherous, snobbish, pretentious, and altogether preposterous Miss Slowcomb—with affection. With regret. There are some who are too high and pure to inspire love. Miss Berridge was among these. She was never silly or helpless or charming. Nobody had ever loved her. All respected her too greatly. So much for Utopias.

Mr. Dalton, again, was different from anybody whom Felix had previously known. He was a tall, thin, careless man who could not spell, could not remember any detail, and could not work steadily. He sprang about, somewhat after the manner of Mr. Cracken; but owing to his tallness and the confined space in which he worked, the springs emphasised Mr. Dalton's general impotence. They were the springs, not of energy, but of neurasthenia. They contrasted significantly with his frequent lassitude. Mr. Dalton was about forty. He was married, and he had two ailing children. His wife did not

mend his clothes, or see that he brushed them; and he was accordingly threadbare, dusty, and unkempt. Ill-health made his hair appear lank; it always seemed to need cutting. He was preoccupied and fretfully gloomy; and when he had grown used to the presence of Felix in the cubicle he resumed his habit of telling Miss Berridge all about his domestic troubles in a thin, rather complaining voice.

"It isn't that I want to give you the idea that she's a bad wife," he would say. "Not at all. It's the last thing I'd do. I'm not complaining. Only she doesn't seem able to realise . . . Now, only last night . . ."

Felix would frown when he heard that.

"You *do* want to give that impression," he thought. "You want sympathy. And you don't deserve it, and won't get it. Not from me. Silly old idiot!" And he would swagger out of the cubicle with his nose in the air, full of scorn for a man who would complain of his wife to his typist. The Hunter motto—at no time formulated—was "Never complain." Felix modified it, so as to make it read: "Complain; complain bitterly; but don't let anybody believe you!"

vii

The most hateful task which Felix had had to perform at Nimmodynes was the distribution of voucher copies. This had involved tramping about the City with bundles of papers under his arm. The task had no place in his present work. At Brinksons it was his duty to file voucher copies as they came in; he also looked out for filed electros used in various advertisements; sometimes he took urgent copy to newspaper offices, searched for letters, assisted Miss Berridge in the concealment of Mr. Dalton's faults. All the time he was doing this, he was

learning the business without wishing to do so. Advertising agency seemed to him a loathsome and parasitic occupation. It had neither dignity nor skill. It was crude and stupid and expensive. Yet he learned how to advertise. He discovered an extraordinarily retentive memory for rates and measurements available in the world's press. He read Mr. Dalton's copy for advertisements, heard discussions of the way in which particular phrases were to be displayed, spaces filled, entire series to be arranged; and then he watched the clumsy mind and fingers of Mr. Dalton at work in execution of these plans. Mr. Dalton followed a routine course. His inventions were those of an apprentice. Felix's natural taste soon showed him how little taste Mr. Dalton had, and how much better some of the advertisements would look if they were set in a different way from the one created by Mr. Dalton or, unchecked, by the perversity of the printer. Mr. Dalton knew nothing of types beyond a little jargon. Felix ignored the jargon, and studied a book of types. With these he experimented. Sometimes, for his own amusement, he made sketches of improved proportions and style. His hand was sure, and his eye quick. He was young, bold, self-confident. He could not see the faults of his own experimental designs, because he was ridden with the belief that they were novel, whereas in fact they were merely and obviously experimental; but with each day he grew wiser, more technically adept, more perceptive. He was still only a junior in the office, doing a junior's work at a salary of fifteen shillings a week. But already he sometimes knew better than Mr. Dalton, and always he was conscious of his better knowledge. It is a part of Felix's exasperatingness that he has always known better than anybody else. He has met many people who believed they knew better than he did. But Felix, quite quietly, has always

enjoyed absolute unostentatious certainty. It is this which has made him so little jealous of others, and so maddening to them for that reason.

viii

Pa had been discharged from hospital—so that they all knew there was nothing to expect,—and was being nursed at home by Ma, sinking gradually into a comatose state which was the prelude to death. Felix saw little of him, partly through natural shrinking, partly because Pa was often unable to carry on an intelligible conversation. In the last months of his illness Pa depended wholly upon Ma, upon whose energy he lived. In those days the alienation which had been caused by poverty and illness and wretched sense of disaster was altogether overcome; and if Pa had not been dying, and thus casting sorrow upon them, the opening era might have been bright with hope. It was not so. It was miserable. But it was shot with more vivid colours. It was not altogether grim.

Grumps came to visit his dying son-in-law. He felt a trembling satisfaction that he was going to outlive the handsome Malcolm after all. But he was full of groans and disgusting symptoms, and as these were increasingly genuine he was indeed pitiable. He carried an atmosphere of mice wherever he went. His coming created dismay. He was not loved; but compassion took the place of love. This groaning piece of wreckage, the cause of instinctive horror, was welcomed, was fed; he shared whatever the Hunters had, whether of food or coppers. And at length he would go away again, weary of life, but clinging to it with the desperate tenacity of the tragically old.

Driven by the restlessness which such a home of sick-

ness and silence engendered, the boys had their own outlets. Godfrey was much engaged with his still-extending public performances, and when he was not working thus, or learning his words and rehearsing, he seemed unable to stay indoors. A meal concluded, he would go out of the room; and thereafter a slamming door would be the only announcement of his departure. He would walk many miles, from Holloway to Highgate and Hampstead and Finchley. Strange to see him, as Felix sometimes did, plodding along close to the wall or the shops or fences beside the road, his head down, a mysterious figure of preoccupation.

Godfrey had, moreover, friends of his own age—old schoolfellows in two families;—and with these boisterous young men he found happiness. They made much of him; he sang, walked, talked with them, and his invented or embroidered tales of strange doings seemed to them gloriously fabulous. He did not play games with them, because he played no games at all; he never brought them home. They came sometimes to the flat to call; but as if with brusque haste he would always take them out at once. These young men gave boisterous parties, with superb feasts. Their home was like an hotel, at which meals were always in process of being served, to which nobody knew how many persons up to five-and-twenty would come upon any evening. Beds in the bathroom, beds in chairs and upon floors, were common. Rousing singsongs, with beer and smoking and dancing, in the course of which all roared old choruses and were loudly merry, gave Godfrey his restorative amusement. Under the influence of these friends, and also his public successes, from which he sometimes earned as much as ten guineas in a single startling week, only to fall to nothing at all in the week that followed, Godfrey lost his air of superiority and some of his refinement. He developed

a bonhomie which in his new calling proved invaluable. But, until much later, he unbent less at home than anywhere else. The cause of that was his dislike of Pa, which persisted even though Pa lay dying.

Felix, necessarily quieter in his pleasures, since his deep love for Ma forbade him to leave her evening after evening to the solitary confinement of the domestic drudge, fell in love. During the whole of the last period of Pa's illness Felix was deeply involved in this green-sickness. It surpassed all previous loves—so numerous and so transient that I have not thought it worth while to mention them; and for six months it was his real life. The drawings, the work at the office, the football he played, the mixed biscuits of his ordinary relaxations, were as nothing to this overwhelming, face-scorching passion.

The young woman, who was about ten years older than Felix, served in the shop of her father, whose business was that of a picture-framer and artists' colourman. She was taller than Felix, and had merry, rather protruding eyes and a mass of fluffy hair. When Felix went to the shop for a pencil or a piece of india-rubber, he always stood breathlessly inside the door after the bell had rung, in case Mr. Seymour himself might come to serve the customer; and when Mr. Seymour walked into the shop Felix's purchase was quickly made. But with Nellie Seymour the case was different. She was always bright and smiling, and the two had long talks and discussions which ranged from colours to Ibsen, and from the Indian love lyrics to a joint distaste for gorgonzola cheese. Felix loved her passionately, but without much clearness. If he saw her he was radiant; if he did not see her he was cast down. But I do not gather that his love was more than a happy agitation.

Mr. Seymour Felix did not like. Mrs. Seymour was

a stout, commonplace woman, alarmingly like a caricature of her pretty daughter. One evening Felix, passing through Lincolns Inn Fields, saw Mr. Seymour sitting upon a seat there with his arm affectionately round the waist of a young stranger; but he never spoke of this, and only eyed the unconscious Mr. Seymour rather sharply the next time he went into the shop. It puzzled Felix that an old man like Mr. Seymour should embrace a strange young woman while his wife still lived; but Felix has never been censorious and he made no serious reflection upon the incident. When, however, Nellie announced to her young friend that she was engaged to be married, and named as her lover a wretched-looking little man of her own age who had seemed to him to be merely contemptible, Felix was broken-hearted for a day—for a week. He received a deep shock. His heart seemed to stop beating. A terrible flush made his cheeks burn. And then pride came to his rescue.

"Splendid!" he gasped. "Failing myself, I don't know anybody more deserving!"

It was feeble, but it served. Nellie's happiness was doubled.

"Oh, you go on!" she laughed. "Boy like you!" Her eyes sparkled. If her father had not just then come into the shop she would, in her happiness, have kissed Felix.

ix

There came now a real crisis in the family life of the Hunters. One morning they all awoke to find that Pa was dead. Felix, opening his eyes in response to a low call, found Ma in the room.

"Boys," she said. "Godfrey . . . Felix."

"Hullo." He was instantly alert, and even Godfrey had responded with a drowsy sound.

"Get up, quickly." She said no more, but was gone, as quietly as she had come.

Both scrambled out of bed, bewildered, and went at once to the next room. Pa lay there full of peace, his cough stilled and his poor tortured brain at rest. No longer would he struggle to recapture some old thought, or some knowledge which he had once possessed, and which had been taken from him in the gradual failure of memory and mind.

The room was only half-lighted, and Pa was the merest dim shape, covered to the chin by the bedclothes, his eyes fast-closed, his face grey and pure. The boys stood a moment within the door, but they did not venture farther. A chill was upon Felix's heart; he was the first to turn away. How strange, he thought, to feel so little. Pa's death meant, apparently, some relief to him, but only that. Some relief, perhaps, to all of them. Nothing more, except to Ma. There were no tears, there was no deep sorrow. This was death. Death, he reminded himself. Never again would he . . .

Was then Felix cold, indifferent? Was he in some way numbed?

They were all sober; but it was not of Pa's death that they thought; it was that they must instantly move from Flemington Street, and so put an end to his era in their lives.

Felix was thoughtful. Was life so much, and death so little?

x

One Monday morning, a month later, when the Hunters had moved to rickety but charming rooms in an old house in Highgate Village, Felix arrived at the office very punctually, as he was at that time in the habit of doing, and as he hung up his hat and coat he caught

sight, over his shoulder, of another early arrival. He remained petrified with surprise. The newcomer was a girl—a girl of about his own height and age. She was wearing a grey overcoat and a black hat, and went past into the range of cubicles reserved for those who formed the counting-house at Brinksons. By dodging slightly, Felix could see her face through the open door. She was dark and sallow, with lips that, owing to ill-health, were larger than they should have been; and she had a rolling, stiff-armed walk, as though she were self-conscious and as though her knees yielded at every step. She had very dark and beautiful hair, almost black, worn in such a way that it revealed a white and open brow.

“Hm!” grunted Felix, seating himself and feeling very busy, as he always did upon Monday mornings, when there was nothing to do. The grunt was repeated. “Hm. Some young woman to do the work cheap. Add the folio numbers into the cash columns.” He smoothed back his own abundant and curly hair, and cocked a plump but straight nose into the air. His fresh-coloured cheeks were already shaven, but the copper-coloured down glistened upon them soon after the razor had passed. There was an indescribable brightness in his eyes.

With these bird-like eyes, Felix looked over his desk, and frowned at the fact that the only work in hand was an unpalatable task which he had been postponing for a fortnight. It was hellish to contemplate such a thing on a Monday morning. He pulled a writing-pad towards him, and began to draw a series of heads and faces, practising his “line,” as he called it, and incidentally caricaturing young Jenks, the post-boy. And as Felix was thus engaged, young Jenks himself, a pasty-faced child who was as knowing as an old cat, dived into the room.

“Seen er new girl?” he asked. “Counting house.”

"Yes," drawled Felix, pretending to be bored and grown-up. "Who is she?"

"I dunno-er . . . Melville, her name is."

"What's her other name?"

"Er—dunno. Er—think it's—er—Rhoda . . . Not sure . . . I say, gie's that."

Master Jenks pounced upon the writing pad, only to find himself despoiled and his wrist strongly gripped. He cried "Ouch!" and rushed from the cubicle, while the crumpled caricature was torn into twenty pieces and placed carefully in the waste-paper basket.

"Rhoda Melville." Felix pursed his lips. He did not like the name much. On the whole his first impression of Rhoda Melville was unfavourable. He did not care for her stiff-armed rolling walk, or her sallowness, or her parted, slightly swollen lips. . . . All the same, he found that business took him into the counting-house during the morning. Rhoda Melville had a neat figure, and wore a simple white muslin blouse with a tweed skirt. He liked it. At that time Felix liked to see girls wearing blouses and tweed skirts. She had pretty ears, only half-hidden by her very fine dark hair. And as he was noticing this, Rhoda Melville looked straight at him.

Felix hastily withdrew. His heart was beating rather faster than before. He did not quite like Rhoda Melville, but he recognised at once that she had the most lustrous, most beautiful eyes he had ever seen. They were surrounded by such dark rings in Rhoda's face that they appeared enormous. A man might drown in such eyes, and be lost to sense for a lifetime.

CHAPTER IX: RHODA

i

THE rooms in Highgate Village were in a very old house. The landlord lived upon the ground floor, where he carried on the trade of a tobacconist; and for eight shillings a week the Hunters had three rooms above. In one of these—the smallest—slept Ma; in another the boys had two beds; in the third they all lived. The sitting-room was not quite square. Its floor was uneven, and its ceiling was low. The window was small. But the cream-painted walls of wood were fresh, and the sparse furnishing was almost adequate. It was poor and unimpressive, but the Hunters felt at last that they had a home.

Godfrey had now abandoned his daily work. Through the aid of professional friends he was embarked upon his natural career, and had made a contract to appear as a single turn at the smaller music-halls controlled by an early syndicate. These halls were suburban and provincial; and when Godfrey was in or near London he continued to live at home. Otherwise he was even more of a stranger to the others than he had been. He now carried with him the conscious air of the actor. Nobody, looking at Godfrey's blue chin and dignified carriage, or hearing his increasingly resonant voice, could have mistaken his calling. He was, moreover, abandoned to the catch-phrases of the profession and the halls. There began to appear blank limits to his imagination. Professionalism,

technique, had become ends in themselves. Godfrey's course was set.

Ma and Felix sometimes laughed affectionately when Godfrey made an effective exit. To have the theatre brought into daily life seemed to them a great joke. They would stand together, bright-eyed, watching Godfrey's majestic progress down the street. Not ridicule was in their hearts, but loving amusement. Sometimes, perhaps, concern; but that was Ma's. She alone had tests of character to apply. Felix's amusement was the purer. If you heard his laugh you knew that it held no malice. It was deep, almost unearthly, for Felix had now developed a bass voice far too powerful for ordinary use. It was one of the most powerful voices ever heard. That is why, as a rule, Felix spoke so softly. And, however unaware Godfrey may have been of his own pedantic insistence upon the jargon of the halls, Felix missed none of it. He never missed anything which invited ridicule. He was like Ma, whose simplicity caused everybody to abuse her kindness, but whose mind was devastating in its knowledge of the ways in which her kindness was being abused. Felix's sense of the absurd was growing each day more acute. Not yet had his sense of compassion developed, as it afterwards did, to counteract and to sweeten into irony this destructive satiric gift.

He began by being amused by Ma and Godfrey. They were subjects near to his hand. He was equally amused by Mr. Dalton and Miss Berridge. Here, therefore, began also his gift for raillery. He could entertain his mother and his brother, and his and their friends, by quite truthful accounts of office life. He could do precisely the same by describing his teacher and his fellow-pupils at the art-classes which he was now attending at nights in a neighbouring Board School. His mischievous selections of Godfrey's choicer tones and assumptions were overwhelm-

ing. Sometimes it occurred to those whom he thus diverted that possibly they were themselves the subjects of intoxicating memoirs relished by others. Into their friendship stole a tinge of anxiety.

ii

Besides going to his art-classes at the Board School, and working at home, and occasionally taking Ma to the theatre, or playing football, or spending time with one or two boy-friends of his own age, Felix walked much alone. He went into the country lanes with a sketch book, a walking-stick, and a pipe to the love of which he was by determination attaining; and he gathered a good deal of accidental information about bird-song, the growth and foliage of trees, the habits of grazing animals. But apart altogether from this pedestrain knowledge, he found a way of life. Those who saw him alone at this time had no doubt of that. He was agreeable, amusing, eager; but he was also remote, as one in a dream. Everything held loveliness for him. He was withdrawn, adoring, ecstatic; as those happily in love are unaccountably exultant. Often, in summer, during one of his walks, he would sketch nothing, would think nothing, would only sit basking in consciousness, warmed by the sun, happy in contemplation. At such times he was unaware of impressions. At no time was he deliberately observant, since interest or affection were his sole teachers; but in these cases it was as though he communed with the angelic host. All understanding seemed within his grasp. At no time afterwards was Felix so near being a poet. Several of those who met him then were able to persuade themselves by means of some juggling with the doctrine of reincarnation that they had been in company with Keats; but fortunately Felix never guessed this, or his *riposte*, height-

ened by self-conscious rejection of the implied compliment, would have been terrible. I can imagine it.

The nearness of Hampstead gave direction to many of his shorter walks. Highgate he found an astonishingly rural place for a London suburban district, and to go by way of the Highgate Ponds across the Heath to the flag-staff was at that time, as it still may be, an excursion into the country. Felix loved it. On Sundays, when Godfrey was at home, they sometimes went together to the Bull and Bush inn, and drank Scotch Ale, and walked home again along the Spaniards Lane. But at all times it was unique in his experience, and held its own wonder in every season.

And so two years went by, amid work and dreams, and Felix was eighteen and Godfrey twenty-three. And Ma—incredibly!—was nearly fifty. She was plumper and browner and happier now, and through being alone together so much she and Felix had become greater friends than ever, so that they understood each other, and thought for each other, in a rare degree. Ma saw Godfrey engaged in the only work which he could enjoy and in which he could realise his talent; she saw Felix close at hand experimenting with life and his gift of sensitiveness. She had no life of her own, apart from her boys. Her one desire was to serve them. Often she would take advantage of Felix's absence to go through his drawings, testing them by her love and her own artistic instinct. The quality was so variable that she was never certain about him. She would sit for a long time over a drawing, pondering its happy strokes and laboured, perfunctory patches. Never, never the perfect whole. Always a fundamental indolence, an indifference. . . .

"Either . . ." she said; and shook her head, smiling and concerned. She was sometimes very grave. She

loved him deeply, and was bewildered by his character, which was bafflingly so mingled.

iii

Felix, feeling very hearty and blown-about by the wind, breasted the rising ground of the Heath. The wind caught his breath. All the bushes were swaying fiercely, and the trees vehemently pitching under the onset of these sudden gusts. They were brilliantly green, not yet full of foliage; and this was a late Spring gale. The sky was a luminous grey, and darker fleeces of cloud were rushing, much nearer the earth, at a headlong gallop towards the south-west. Very few people were upon the Heath, for the day was unattractive to all but sturdy walkers. Felix, alone, stimulated by his exertion and the uplifting weather, felt himself a king as he reached the road. He slackened speed, turning to look with sparkling eyes through the keen air. Exultation pervaded him. He felt he could walk a hundred miles upon such a day, eternally untiring.

With that impulse to conquer time and space uppermost in his consciousness, Felix plunged down upon the West Heath towards Child's Hill; and as he ran down the steep descent and felt the north-east wind sweeping unchecked across the open space he was the more exhilarated. What could be better? It was superb.

"Damn it, I'm getting hearty!" he thought suddenly, pulling up with self-consciousness. It was a disturbing thought. He had before now felt his knuckles bruised by hearty people, and he feared heartiness in himself as he would have feared any other great personal disaster. The thought checked him. He walked for a time sedately. Better to be prim than pseudo-bluff. He was already a rebel against the convention of the muscular and carousing poet and artist before that convention arose. And as

he walked thus, keeping to the straight path with something like gravity, Felix caught sight before him of a figure which was familiar. It was the figure of a girl, about his own height and age, walking more slowly than himself along the same pathway. That stiff-armed rolling walk, that overcoat, that hat . . . He hesitated.

For two years Rhoda Melville had been at Brinksons, and although during the first few weeks of her presence Felix had been interested, as he would have been interested in the presence of any other girl, he had not made friends with her. The failure was due not alone to shyness upon either side, but to the strict departmentalism of Brinksons. Those in one cubicle knew nothing of the lives of those in other cubicles. They formed a microcosm. They were profoundly indifferent. Egocentric to a man (and to a woman), they shrugged at the rest of the human species. For all Felix knew, Rhoda Melville might live at Eltham or Ealing or Wandsworth—three districts of London which are at different points of the compass; she might be married, an orphan, one of a large family; or she might be a local tennis champion, a Theosophist, or sing in her local church choir. That he should see her at Hampstead was a surprise.

There was a moment's wavering as his brisker step brought him almost to the point of overtaking Rhoda. He could not yet see her face; she could not have noticed him, as she was walking in the same direction as himself. There was time to fly. Time to raise his cap only, and pass . . . Something a little shabby, a little pathetic and lonely, about the moving figure decided Felix. He slowed down, and, as he came abreast of Rhoda, stopped.

"Hullo. This is very extraordinary," said Felix.

Rhoda looked up. Her pale face flushed slightly. Those lustrous eyes addressed themselves to him in all their sadness. She stood quite still in the pathway, her shabby

old grey overcoat open at the neck, showing the blouse beneath.

"Why extraordinary?" she asked.

Felix jumped. He was amazed.

"D'you *live* at Hampstead, then?"

"No," came the amazing answer. "At Highgate."

iv

Close at hand, Rhoda's white was seen to be cream, for she was very dark. She had a very straight nose, and pretty teeth. The nostrils were delicate, and when she smiled a dimple appeared in each cheek. This was the more remarkable because her face was thin. The cheekbones were high. Her eyes were a deep grey; marvellous and beautiful eyes, which would have made a much happier face pathetic. But Rhoda did not look happy at any time. That was one thing Felix realised upon this Saturday afternoon. There was a greyness, a fatigue to be observed in Rhoda which aroused pity. No hint of tragedy.

"I live in Highgate too, you know," he said. "Are you going anywhere in particular?"

"Just for a walk."

"And then home? May I come with you? I'm out alone."

Again a faint flush, showing a sensitiveness that pleased him. It was a most delicate flush, that faded as it rose.

"I'd like it," said Rhoda, shyly.

They walked together along the path. Trees were rich and swirling with early leaf. Now they were in the hollow, and were protected from the wind by the higher ground about them. Everywhere that enchantingly bright green. . . . Glancing sideways, Felix saw that Rhoda's peculiar walk was entirely due to the fact that she kept her shoulders rigid. "Why does she do that?" he won-

dered. And then his curiosity was checked by a glimpse of her pale and sorrowful face. That pity, almost protective, which he had already felt, displaced every other emotion.

"How funny that we shouldn't have seen each other before," began Felix. "I can't understand it."

"I *have*," she answered. The delightful dimple flashed into her cheek. There were now two glances sideways, which encountered. It was a lovely moment of intimacy. Felix was vaguely apologetic. "I've often seen you. I thought you didn't want to see me."

"I?" stammered Felix. He was filled with consternation, heat now in his own cheeks. "Oh, how I hate that you should have felt that. I would *never* . . ." He was for once at a loss for words.

"Why should you? We're only at the same office. You don't know me."

"Well, *that* can be mended," Felix hazarded. "Don't you think?"

Rhoda smiled once more. It was almost an arch and mischievous smile.

"I suppose it can," she said, looking down.

For some time after that they walked in silence, both a little breathless and self-conscious.

v

There was a deftness in her speech which pleased Felix. It was a response to his own quick, light manner of speaking. But Rhoda enunciated her words more distinctly than Felix, who was at times almost inaudible. He had a rather pleasing, smiling style; whereas she was entirely serious. Nevertheless, Rhoda could follow his tone. She was quick enough for that, although she was so young.

Her life had been so lonely and so hard during the last few years that she had developed an early maturity.

"D'you live in Highgate Village?" asked Felix. No; she did not. She had a room in a road off the Archway Road. "Oh, Upper Holloway," jeered Felix. Rhoda flushed. "Well, morally it's Upper Holloway; but we'll pretend it's Highgate," he allowed. The point being that Highgate is a name to conjure with, as Hampstead is; while dwellers in certain surrounding districts are inclined by snobbishness to usurp one or other of these two names for their own social enhancement. Thus with the Archway Road. "Do you live with your mother and father?" he next ventured, to break a silence.

Rhoda shook her head.

"I haven't got either," she explained. "I live alone. I have a bed-sitting-room. Get my own meals. I used to live with my aunt; but I couldn't stand her. She's . . . she's unkind." Again her head was lowered. Felix was horrified at his own blundering question and at his mental picture of this poor girl alone in a house of strangers.

"Aren't you awfully lonely?" he demanded. "I should be."

"Sometimes." For the first time a little twang came into her voice. "Sometimes"—it is a difficult word to pronounce. Felix did not notice. He was absorbed in her state. "Get my own meals!" Good Lord! As if he could not immediately see the meals, the biscuits and pennyworths of stuff. He was aghast.

"Have you got any friends?" The head was shaken. "Oh, but look here; you must come and see *us*. Come and see my mother. You'd like her." They were upon the road now, near the Bull and Bush, and pausing at a question of objective. "Come back to tea this afternoon—now. Will you?"

Felix did not know how entreating, how caressing was

his manner. But a most passionate sympathy had been aroused in him. He saw her with different eyes, no longer as a girl at the office, but as one needing help and protection.

Rhoda looked down a third time. Then up again at his sparkling face.

"I don't think I'd better," she said, with some reserve.

"Why not? Don't be absurd!"

"Shall I?" It was barely murmured. Rhoda smiled. They both smiled.

vi

And so came tea for three in the cream-painted room above the tobacconist's shop in Highgate Village. The cups were odd: what did it matter? The tablecloth was a cheap one, and already had been darned. The Hunters did not mind, and if Rhoda minded she did not say that she minded or show it in her manner. She looked curiously at Ma, and saw a face that reminded her of Felix's, and heard a voice that was kinder than Felix's. Ma was dark, as Rhoda was dark; but as her immediate anxieties were less than they had been Ma had begun to leave her painful thinness behind. She looked very bright and fresh and hospitable behind the teapot; and as Felix took his seat he saw with excusable glee that she had made him a cake.

"Ma's cakes are good," he remarked to Rhoda. "The best. She can't make a Christmas pudding; but she can make a cake."

Rhoda looked uncertainly at the two of them, not sure of her cue.

"They don't like my Christmas puddings," explained Ma, quite gaily. "They're too digestible."

"They're not Christmas puddings at all. Very good

puddings—but as for being black and moist—they're *not*."

"Must they be?" asked Rhoda, at first in bewilderment, but then, seeing his disgust, instantly changing her expression to one of impudence.

Felix cut the cake. It was useless to parley with these freemasons. And as he did this he was surprised to see his mother hand the bread-and-butter (cut rather thick) to Rhoda, and also the jar of home-made potted meat. His eyes wandered, first to Rhoda, and then to Ma. He sat down again, abruptly. Fool that he had been! What a devil Ma was! He ate enormously—and encouragingly—and Rhoda also made a good tea.

"I get my own meals," remembered Felix. Why, the poor kid was starving.

vii

"D'you like Brinksons—I mean, being there?" asked Felix, suddenly.

"No." Rhoda's reply was short. "I hate it. It's so . . . so soulless. Nobody cares about you. Just hateful telling you what you must do . . . signing the time-book——"

"Oh, but you needn't do that," cried Felix. "I never do."

"You can afford to lose your job."

"I can't!"

They looked at each other, glowing. Ma watched them, smiling and sympathetic, a little brown woman with warmly-coloured cheeks. She was like a judge between them.

"*You* know how it is, don't you, Mrs. Hunter," Rhoda appealed. "Just think of going to an office every day, adding figures all day long, and writing them down, and

only *hearing* about figures all the time. It's so monotonous that sometimes I could scream. Mr. Peters, the cashier, is the most miserable man I've ever met. Nothing's right. If you try ever so hard you can't please him. He's horrid."

"Who wants to please him?" demanded Felix. "Wretched old man."

"I've got to. Else I shall lose my job."

Felix frowned. He was for a moment without an answer.

"I'm humanising Mr. Dalton," he said at last. "I advised him to take his wife out a bit more. He complains to Miss Berridge about her, you know. D'you like Miss Berridge?"

Rhoda shook her head. It was evident that she did not like Miss Berridge.

"She's stuck-up. She *is*. She looks at me as if I was an insect."

"I expect you think *I'm* stuck-up."

Rhoda flushed. Then she hesitated. A quick glance was exchanged between the three of them, and there came a burst of laughter.

"Well," stammered Rhoda. "You never *saw* me."

She was warming and unclenching in this cheerful company, and her laughter was ready.

"Now Miss Berridge isn't stuck-up at all. She's very peculiar. She's awfully good-natured, and wants to help everybody. But she can't *begin*." Felix was serious again, and expository. "If you wanted help, and asked for it, she'd be as glad as possible."

Rhoda shook her head. Her lip was curled.

"To a man. To you. Not to me. She's . . ."

"I'm sure you're wrong," cried Felix.

"To a girl she'd be different. She'd want to interfere. She'd think you were very wicked if you were only silly."

She's never been married. She thinks everybody's wicked. She's suspicious of their goodness to begin with."

"What, d'you think all unmarried people——"

"Women. That age." Rhoda was very convinced. It was Felix's turn to shake his head, which he did with annoying assurance.

"Rubbish," said he. Hot anger rose in Rhoda, and made her cheeks fiery. She trembled. "I'll tell you," proceeded Felix, not blind to these signs of disagreement, but as convinced as she, and more sure of his ability to express what he felt. "She's not like that. I've talked to her——"

"So have I."

"She's got a weakness. She wants to feel she's a benefactress. When I first went there I found old Dalton was complaining all day and every day about his wife—to Miss Berridge. She was listening, and consoling him——"

"Believing every word he said," flashed Rhoda. "Against his wife."

"Exactly."

"Because she's a woman."

"No! Because old Dalton *asked* for pity. She loves giving help and advice. She's a slave to it. If you were to say "Oh, Miss Berridge: what shall I do? I've killed my uncle," she'd hide you. She's the sort of woman that gives escaping convicts clothes."

"*Men* convicts," grimly annotated Rhoda.

"Either sex. Because it makes her feel splendid. She's got nothing else to live for. She's soft-hearted, although she looks hard. She's a mother to old Dalton."

"Well, she's not a mother to any of the *girls* in the office. She's a nasty old maid; and she looks down on me as if I was dirt. I hate her."

Rhoda began to cry a little. Tears were in her eyes, and the corners of her mouth quivered.

viii

The crying was very slight, for Rhoda was not usually tearful. She was immediately again composed, while Ma began to gather the tea-things together. Ma had a most friendly inspiration.

"How would you like to help me wash up?" she asked, with a look of such kindness that Rhoda, embarrassed by her recent emotion, rose immediately, with an answering look of deep gratitude. To have cried when she was so happy; to have cried from excitement, when even sorrow, even youthful despair, could not move her to weeping, was enough to humiliate her deeply. Rhoda was ashamed. Her shame lent energy to her reply, and she moved quickly to the assistance of Ma, glad of an opportunity to use her hands.

They withdrew to the little scullery in order to wash up the tea-things, leaving Felix to ruminate upon the recent discussion and to generalise his inferences from it.

"How extraordinary it is," he thought. "*Nothing* convinces a woman when she's made up her mind to be wrong." He clucked his tongue marvellingly, impatiently. "Amazing!" he ejaculated. "Incomprehensible stubbornness!"

ix

They did not speak any more that day about Miss Berridge and Brinksons. They spoke of many other things. It was a pleasure to the others to see how Rhoda ceased to look pale and wretched, and became even happier and more at home as the evening advanced. It was she, in fact, who offered to help in preparing the supper, to which

meal she had with real difficulty been persuaded to stay. And so, as if she had been constantly in this home, Rhoda went to the cupboard and back to the table and then out into the scullery, as blithe as a child.

"You *have* been good to me," she said to Ma, at the end of the evening,

The others were equally happy in this knowledge that they had made Rhoda happy. Felix could tell from Ma's expression that she was pleased, that she liked Rhoda, and his spirits rose accordingly. He looked upon them shyly bidding each other good-night, and he threw his shoulders back. The gesture showed that he was taller than Rhoda. He looked down slightly into her enormous eyes, and there ran through his heart a singular tremor. His eye rested upon Rhoda's cheek, the gentle line of her neck. . . . He had the sense of enveloping her in his warm protection. But he had another feeling altogether. It shook him.

"Take your coat, duckie," said Ma, swiftly and quietly. "It's very cold."

Felix frowned. The speech was normal; he had no resentment of it; but the suggestion that he was still a very little boy was a check to his rising mood. Thoughtfully, he led the way down to the front door, and out into the moonlit street. A crowd of shoppers and wanderers strolled in the beautiful evening. The butcher's shop was full of buyers; one of the old cable cars stood gloomily waiting to descend Highgate Hill. Lights shining through trees with tender green Spring leaves filled his heart with rapture. There was a lovely stillness in the moon's light, a hush and beauty in all things; and the air was balmy yet with the day's sunshine. The wind had dropped. All was clear above, and the stars thickly clustered, faint by contrast with the young moon's clearness, but visible. Both Felix and Rhoda drew deep breaths. They walked

sedately down the village street, and into the greater quiet and shadow of the hill; and as they went Felix knew that Rhoda's elbow often touched or was close to his, as if to emphasise their intimacy.

But she did not speak, and Felix, since he had looked upon Rhoda with that strange consciousness of magnetic physical attraction, was less talkative than usual. He wanted to beg her pardon for his obstinate talk about Miss Berridge, and was too much afraid of hurting her afresh by a revival of the subject. It fell away from his mind, and was lost. Everything was lost, except the moment. He was thinking exultantly, was seeing and feeling the deep shadows and the brilliant green of the leaves through which lights shone, was absorbed in the sensations of this magical proximity to love. He was excited, and full of electric eagerness to embrace, to caress, to reassure Rhoda in her pathetic loneliness. So it happened that almost in silence the two of them went together down the hill, and to Rhoda's home. At the gate they lingered for an instant, but for an instant only. The whole of this side of the road was in shadow, and in the white brilliance of the farther pavement a lamp with its yellow flame appeared trivial. In the darkness Rhoda's face was like stone; but in bending towards him she gave an impression of such tender youth, of such appeal and yieldingness, that Felix was drawn yet closer. Their hands met, and for an instant were clasped. That was all. A hasty good-bye, and she was gone. The door through which she had disappeared was silently closed.

Felix made the return journey with his head among the stars. Ma noticed how bright his eyes were, and for the remaining half-hour of their waking day how abstracted and kind were his answers to the remarks she made.

CHAPTER X: THE YOUNG GAZELLE

i

ON the following morning Felix awoke to sunshine and most engrossing happy reflections upon the doings of yesterday. He lay in a luxurious curve, his hair over his eyes, and as he raised his hands in protection against the sun's glitter, Felix could see his fingers outlined as if with a fringe of pink. He gave a little smiling grunt, and with pleasure stretched his body afresh in slow relaxation. Immediately, his mind leapt to Rhoda. It was a happy subject for thought. He had seen her in so many new and different aspects during the afternoon and evening that his present vision was ever-changing. It was as though he tried to combine all his mental pictures into some essential portrait. Lovely, his imagining; at first solely of a fresh spirit, something outside the daily world, and only by some treasurable accident to be encountered in it. He speculated as to her thoughts, her feelings, her way of perceiving and reflecting upon all that she experienced. It was an absorbing pastime. . . .

Then, as he recalled Rhoda's shabby grey shapeless overcoat, Felix frowned. She was far too indifferent, he thought, to the importance of heightening the effect of her beauty by clothes. Already she was beautiful in his eyes. Was not every young girl beautiful? Were not all young things? In one of his walks he has seen a young colt playing with a handkerchief which somebody had dropped in the field, and all the fanciful movements of the young thing had been entrancing. It was an uncon-

scious grace, but to the eye intoxicating. Rhoda had that beauty. Not, perhaps, in ugly shoes and a shabby grey overcoat and a black hat; but in herself. Closing his eyes, Felix recalled those movements of youth in her which had so charmed him. They were movements always from the waist, quick turns and recoveries, all of such grace that they had taken his breath away. Only her manner of dressing was wrong. He pictured Rhoda dressed as he would have her dress. In yellow, very simply; in rich ivory; in a particular biting red such as he had seen in an old Dutch picture . . . ah! he wanted colours and a brush! But she must hold herself more freely, with her arms loose. It was essential that her carriage should be perfect. That would come. With health and confidence that would come; and the flowing lines of the dress would reveal the immature grace of her figure. . . . Delicious!

Felix could not keep still, owing to his excitement at the picture; and so he was forced to get up. At first he looked out of the window, and could see nothing but the empty street; then he found that it was still very early in the morning. Unconsciously, he cast an eye back to the agreeable bed. It was tempting. . . . Nevertheless, he washed and dressed, and prowled silently into the kitchen. The early hours are the best of all, he thought—as if in a whisper, so as not to waken Ma. All the really great men who had ever lived were those who had made use of the very early morning for their life-tasks. He would be even as they had been. But was he—even embryonically—a great man? It had never been suggested. He did not feel great. On the contrary. But that, after all, might be the modesty of true greatness. You never could tell. Miss Slowcomb, who had been prepared to dictate the chivalry due to her, was an example of modern self-consciousness. Felix felt that he had in

him nothing of that kind. There was extreme simplicity about his character. Extraordinary simplicity. He must be the most readable, the most knowable, person in the world. For the moment that vision of himself had the most singular charm. There was, he repeated, in him the height of simplicity. Then the reaction set in. It was not altogether his sense of the ridiculous in motion, although it was struggling to awaken. No, there wasn't. How funny! He was not simple; not honest; he fudged. He was intricate, disingenuous. He was an ignorant blustering liar with a long tongue and an apparently honest face. He'd be found out. When?

"All the same," said he, "I was right about Miss Beridge. She doesn't understand her. I do. I understand almost everything."

ii

That day he spent in the company of Jacob Harcourt, a young man whom he had met in a teashop and with whom he had made friends. The two of them took a great walk of something like twenty miles, talking very little, but maintaining companionship throughout the day. Jacob was twenty, less clever than Felix, but more tenacious of knowledge. He had a grim way of seizing facts and clinging to them. He was short and sturdy, not at all sentimental, bookish but not well-read; and his admiration of our friend, although considerable, remained this side idolatry. Jacob was little darker than Felix; and he was physically a good deal more robust. He smoked a short pipe, hunched up his shoulders, wore shabby clothes the colour of coke, and his boots were down at heel. He was not a Londoner, but he had lived from childhood in the City, and his accent held no sign of his midland origin. He was a clerk in a large and busy office in Cannon Street, and his firm dealt wholesale in

what are called soft goods. Felix liked Jacob—partly because Jacob had brains and a kind of shabby honesty and determination; partly also because he was by nature a good friend, making no claims inopportunately, but responding quickly and with level temper to mood and situation.

Something put this very thought of Jacob's good friendship into Felix's mind as they walked. It was the word "claims," which flashed in among his thoughts like a seed blown by the wind. Claims!

"Now that's *another* funny thing," suddenly exclaimed Felix. They were striding together along an interminable lane, with hedges full of small green leaves upon each side of them, stretching onwards until the lane was transformed in the distance into a divine avenue. "Claims. Whatever you do, you're either making or resisting claims of some sort. You can't see them. Weak people . . . it's weak people who make claims. It's a weakness. They're parasites. Clinging to rights, inventing rights. They don't *really* exist. And to call it affection's the worst thing of all."

"I don't know what you're talking about," retorted the stubborn Jacob.

"Of course you don't! Nor do I!" suavely returned Felix. "I'll tell you. You shall hear." Jacob groaned. He hunched his shoulders more than usual. Felix continued: "Yesterday afternoon I met one of the girls at the office. She's all alone—nobody to look after her. I took her home to tea, and we had a long talk. I liked her. But what happens? I immediately begin planning to teach her how to dress herself—in the right colours, with the right lines—so on. You see what I mean: I immediately plan to rob her of her liberty."

"Human," said Jacob, shortly.

"That's what I say. Look at everybody you know.

The stupidest of them are the ones who want to force their doctrines down your throat. Stuff they've got from newspapers and rot and . . . just picked up out of the dung-heap. Not what *you* like; but what they think is good for you. And then they try to force it—as if they were Crusaders. All so stupid! Teetotalism, their particular brand of morality. The man who's down on immorality . . .”

“He's got another vice,” interjected Jacob.

“Well, what does it come to?”

“Tyranny.”

“It can't. Because we're all doing the same thing. All fancy ourselves as tutors. Now I come to think of it, the number of people who give me advice without being asked for it is enormous.”

“You don't take it,” said Jacob.

“No. Do I give *you* advice?”

Jacob thought for a moment. Then his sturdy midland voice, in which there was no midland accent, gruffly and shortly revealed a truth.

“You don't exactly give advice, Felix. You say what you think. As you've *been* doing—just now. In a way that's propaganda. You want to spread your ideas. But you're not a fanatic . . . not given to something you believe above everything else. You haven't got an axe to grind. Not a cast-iron system. Too lazy. So you don't feel called on to interfere with advice. Of course, you take it for granted you know best.”

“But do I make claims? Claims on you, for example.”

Jacob reflected again. Then he shook his head.

“No,” he said. “You're too busy evading other people's claims, I should say.”

Felix received a shock. He saw that Jacob regarded him as an egomaniac. And after all, was he so negative? His *amour propre* was irritated.

"But about this girl, now," he hastily improvised. "What's that?"

"You won't do anything unless she asks you. She'll say 'D'you like my hat?' and you'll say 'It's hell.' Well, then, if she wants to please you she'll make a change. If she doesn't, you'll drop her. You see, you're too polite to say right out: 'That hat's awful!' Some people would do it."

"Damned arrogant of them," cried Felix.

"No more arrogant than you. You think such a lot of your own opinion that you won't give it unless you're asked. And if it's not taken, you turn your back for good. *Fini*."

"My dear good Jacob," observed Felix, serenely. "What a paradoxical fellow you are. According to you, modesty's arrogance."

"Something like that," returned Jacob, unruffled. "*Your* sort of modesty."

"But most people make *claims*," persisted Felix. "That's what I want to get at. They're pathetic, or blustering; or they take you for granted. They're somehow parasitic—if not by one means, then by another. Their instinct is to make use of you."

"Well, they *don't*," shortly returned Jacob. He looked straight in front of him, trudging along. "Not of *you*."

"Well, why?"

Jacob did not know. Presently he admitted that he did not know. Felix also was pondering.

"I think you're all wrong," he said at last, reflectively. "I admit I'm rotten, d'you see. I admit that I'm arrogant."

"You're proud of it."

"Suppose I am? Isn't every man proud of his own faults? He thinks his faults show character. What I want to get at is that I like giving freely. If somebody

tries to force me to do something, I resist. I'm awfully willing if they seem to need something I can give them. It's *claims* that madden me."

"And yet you're a slave to claims," observed Jacob. "When they're not made. There's claims and claims. If your own mind suggests that somebody's got a just claim on you, you're the first to surrender to it."

Felix was puzzled.

"I don't see what you mean," he said.

"Don't you? Think again."

"Claims that aren't made? Claims that I suggest to myself? What d'you mean? What claim do I surrender to?"

Jacob gave him a significant glance.

"I'm thinking of your mother," he answered slowly.

Fire rushed suddenly to Felix's eyes. His cheeks reddened; his lips parted in the most furious anger.

"Shut up!" he cried; and strode forward fiercely, as if to leave Jacob far behind.

iii

Jacob, rather red in his turn, and Felix, very fiercely indignant, continued their walk, the distance between them lessening until they were once more level. But they did not return to the subject which had proved so momentarily agitating. Towards the end of the day, Jacob said, a little awkwardly,

"I'm sorry I made you angry, Felix."

"It's all right. I'm sorry I got angry. You see, it isn't what you think. There's no claim. There's a comradeship. She's my friend."

"Well, you know best," said Jacob, uncomfortably.

"It is so," persisted Felix. "I want you to realise it."

"Look here, Felix. . . . You know I like you. I

don't want to make you angry again. But I see it like this: You can say it's a comradeship, and it is. I love your mother. I think she's fine. I do, really. And then sometimes I think to myself that you're not free. You're thinking of this and that; but if you wanted to go to Canada or the Straits Settlements, you couldn't go. Not if you were offered a big job, or felt you wanted ever so much to go."

"I shouldn't want to go," interposed Felix, coolly.

"I know. I'm saying you *couldn't* go. As to not wanting to go; underneath, it's because you know you couldn't go. It's fixed. That's what I mean by claims."

"Then perhaps they're good things, after all."

"Good and bad," agreed Jacob. "But if a claim keeps you from shaping your own life, it's a . . . well, it's a problem. Supposing, now, you wanted to marry."

"At my age?" Felix laughed cheerfully.

iv

"At any age," returned Jacob.

Monday morning came, and with it Monday morning's breakfast. Entering their living room with his usual impetuosity, Felix found Ma waiting for him. The tea was made, the table was set, all was punctual. Ma, fresh and competent, gave him a loving smile of greeting and served the meal as he sat down. His glance dwelt on her an instant longer than it would normally have done. She was such a tremendously excellent mother. She had such love and kindness and self-suppression. She was more unselfish than anybody Felix had ever met. She gave endlessly. And she *looked* so nice. She had taste and spirit and quality. She was wise and she was tender. She made no claims.

And yet, in asserting that, Felix felt defensive.

Damn Jacob! Felix supposed that there were always busybodies who offered comments upon the domestic lives of their friends. How many husbands and wives had been separated by somebody saying "I shouldn't let her do that—not if she were *my* wife. Of course . . ."

And again "I should *make* him give it to you. You're his wife, aren't you? Oo, you *are* funny. A fool to stand it, I think. . . ."

Young wives, young husbands. . . .

There *must* be freedom. If there were no freedom, if one were a slave to *anything* or anybody, what purpose was there in living? Some people, *most* people, *wanted* to be slaves and to enslave. Watch the engaged girl—how she began to take possession of her young man. "Where you been? Eh? What did he say?" Mock tears; "No, get away . . . you don't love me. Well, then, tell me . . ."

Hell! Jealousy and interference. Mothers-in-law. Not fathers-in-law so much, because they'd been broken in. But some of them must be pretty bad. "Have a cigar. What, you don't smoke? Hm." Or the gossip . . . "I don't expect it's true, but I *heard* . . . I do think she ought to be more careful. Spiteful cat, of course, but *still* . . ."

Felix was munching his breakfast in the cool little room with the cream walls; and Ma was sitting at the end of the table, on the other side of the tea-cosy. She earned no money, but she worked for nothing. She worked for love. If you were going to have a doctrine of individual selfishness, what became of the doctrine of service, the finest belief in the world?

Supposing he *did* want to marry? At any time . . . It wouldn't be Ma's claim that would hold him back. It would be want of money. And that involved obligation. Where there were no claims, there were obligations.

Damn old Jacob. Couldn't he see that? Still, supposing he *did* want to marry?

At the thought of marriage, Felix's face became a single benign and mischievous grin. Rather fascinating, such a speculation. Marriage—he must think about marriage. It was the most difficult thing of all, and yet fools rushed into it as wasps rush into marmalade. And couldn't get out again. Poor God-forsaken idiots . . . Ridiculous and sticky with sentimentality. Greasy and sticky with it.

"I'm pretty sentimental myself," suddenly cried Felix, aloud.

Ma, not a yard away, laughed at the outburst. She did not say anything, however, until he was leaving the house. Then, as he pottered in and out of the room with his coat and his hat, and collected some papers and a little book which he slipped into his pocket, Ma reminded him of something.

"Don't forget to ask Miss Melville to come and see us again soon," she said.

v

Felix went off down the hill to catch his tramcar. A feeling of exhilaration pervaded him. He might see Rhoda at the terminus, and in that case they could travel together. The morning was bright and sunny, very fit for the renewal of their friendship. The hill was rich with trees, and so early in the morning was deserted. He caught a glimpse of brilliant flowers within the entrance gates of Waterlow Park, and saw the cross on top of St. Joseph's retreat sparkling in the sunlight. Often, standing upon Parliament Hill, Felix had swept slowly round from the contemplation of London roofs and spires to where the dome and cross of St. Joseph's stood in dignity above the Highgate Ponds, rising above a mass of foliage. And as his eye travelled farther, up higher still,

to the church with the spire in South Grove, he always laughed with slight glee. The opulent rotundity of the Catholic dome; and the chilling austerity of the English spire. It was nothing, this contrast; as Felix well knew. But it amused him.

And now, seeing St. Joseph's, Felix had a sudden pang of desire to see Italy. He longed to travel and to experience the life of other lands. To savour their colouring; and the superb shapes in which they abounded. Not only for æsthetic reasons, moreover, did he desire to be in the home of post-medieval art; but for purely sensual reasons also. For the heat, the atmospheric clearness, the cypresses. He was possessed by a vision of eternal summer, of age and beauty unspoilt, of lizards basking.

And among the people waiting and running in little groups at the ugly tramway terminus, where cheap shops and a stucco-walled bank crouched beneath the imposingness of a workhouse infirmary and vast public-house, Felix could see no sign of Rhoda. A little chagrined, he travelled alone to the office.

vi

The disappointment had changed his whole mood. He was no longer cheery and nonsensical, but had grown full of gloom. Arrived at the office he went through the outer doors and in among the cubicles, which had glass extending to the ceiling of the large, all-embracing office. The closed windows of the weekend made the place smell like an alley after rain. All was hideous and stale and repellent. Felix loathed it. He had the impulse to kick his chair, and when he sat down and did in fact knock a knee against the leg of the table he was at first savage and then morose. Young Jenks came into the cubicle with his pasty cheeks and his horrid appearance of having

only half-washed his face and only half-brushed his beastly hair.

"Get out!" cried Felix, filled with distaste for so repulsive a creature.

"Spurs didden arf cop it, Sat'day," said Jenks, diplomatically speaking from the doorway.

"Jolly good job," retorted Felix. "Rotten team."

"Oh!" said Jenks, poised like a runner awaiting the pistol, and glancing at his victim. "Monda mornin', eh?"

He skipped away in good time to avoid a book which was moving towards his head, and the book, striking the lintel, fell sprawling to the floor. Fortunately it did not catch the glass partition. And as Felix stooped to pick up the book he saw that Rhoda had just passed on her way to the counting house. She did not notice him, and he caught a glimpse only of her overcoat.

"Damn that coat!" whispered Felix. "I'll burn it." Then he turned to greet Miss Berridge, who at that moment came into the cubicle from the girl clerks' dressing-room. They exchanged morning greetings, and it was clear that Miss Berridge, at least, was quite deceived by Felix's superficial integrity. She smiled cordially, with a special eye for his curly head. An impulse made him say to her, as she removed the cover from her typewriter and prepared to clean the machine: "You know Miss Melville, Miss Berridge, don't you."

Miss Berridge's severe expression, which was really due to modesty, relaxed a little when she spoke. She turned round to look straight into Felix's face. Her grey hair, which always gave the impression that she wore a false front, stood firm and secure above a grey face and gray eyes and a wide, grey-lipped straight mouth. She wore a thin gold chain round her neck, and over her black linen working blouse, with its smart collar and cuffs, the chain trickled slowly until it disappeared through a small

hole into the pocket where Miss Berridge kept her watch. To follow its direction was like following a billiard ball upon a slow and important journey; or a cash ball at a draper's shop. It was this chain which Miss Berridge fingered when anybody spoke to her. It occupied her hand. She fingered it now.

"*Our* Miss Melville?" she asked, after the slightest possible hesitation. She seemed rather guarded. Felix, meeting her gaze fairly, wondered in dread whether there had not been a slight distaste in her tone.

"Yes." He almost abandoned the attempt. Then he plunged. "Miss Berridge—d'you like her?"

Miss Berridge smiled at his eager tone, and equally eager face.

"I hardly know her, Felix. I see her here, of course." The face which Felix saw before him might in time become the gooseberry-eyed pale physiognomy of the sort of English old maid who stays permanently in foreign hotels; but he did not think so. At present it seemed to him to be the face of a very kind woman. Felix prayed that he was not mistaken.

"D'you know she lives all alone?" he demanded.

"*Does* she?" Miss Berridge looked distressed. She was surprised. "D'you mean—not with her people?"

"She hasn't got any 'people,' " retorted Felix, stressing the objectionable word. "She hasn't got any people at all, or any friends, or any money."

"But she can't live on what she gets here. It's about fifteen shillings a week."

"Well, she does."

"Poor girl." Miss Berridge flushed faintly. She looked at Felix again, and Felix, in trying to look disinterested, assumed a rather accusing expression, which put an idea into Miss Berridge's head which he had certainly never intended to suggest. "I'm afraid you think

I ought to have discovered it for myself, Felix," she said, defensively. "Of course, I *do* see her; but just in our room. Never to say much to her. I'm afraid I haven't bothered—I've never thought of it. In fact I thought she lived—surely she used to live with an aunt?"

"I don't know," said Felix. "I wouldn't say it to anybody but you, Miss Berridge, and that's only because you're so kind; but I must . . . well, I feel something ought to be done about her. It's no business of mine, and . . . jolly cheek in fact. But . . . but I don't think she has enough to eat."

Miss Berridge bit her lip as she thought for a moment. She was both embarrassed and self-accusing. They both were very serious, although the concern of Felix with such a question was odd enough. He did not worry about Jenks.

"I'll think of something," she said at last. "I'm glad you spoke to me. At any rate, I'll see that she always has something in the middle of the morning. Only, you see, I can't very well interfere with her. I mustn't seem officious. She'd be very sick if she thought——"

"*You've* got to begin, though," whispered Felix. "That is, if you're going to help her. Here's Dalton's Advertiser. She won't do anything herself. She's too sensitive. She's all nerves. She probably feels you don't like her."

"Did she say so?" Mr. Dalton had been detained at the door, but he was now entering.

"No, no." Felix shook his head. That interview was over, and his point gained. The morning's work proceeded. He felt confused, and rather frightened at the thought that he had been interfering with somebody else, at sharing his knowledge with another person. And then a slight fear of priggishness possessed him. That made him shrug. But he looked once or twice at Miss Berridge; and he knew she could be trusted. "Sport!" he

thought quickly to himself. In that word he commended Miss Berridge. He would have clapped her on the back, but she would not have liked him to do so.

vii

During all that day, Felix was very busy, because a contract for a big series of advertisements for a new patent medicine had just been arranged; and Mr. Dalton was demanding and receiving a great deal of help. In fact Felix was designing advertisements.

"I say, look here," whispered Dalton to Miss Berridge, one time when Felix was out of the room. The two of them stood together, and laughed at a drawing in one of the pieces of copy. It was a burlesque of the block which was actually to be used, and had been made in a few strokes. "He's a clever kid . . ." added Dalton. "I'm a little bit afraid of him. Cleverness, you know . . . I think we all are." And then, as Felix returned, he covered the design and began to speak loudly to Miss Berridge. Felix immediately sat down again, and began once more to work hard. He was interested. All that stored energy which had made him revolt at the suggestions of Jacob, and receive a blow from the fact of his solitary journey, and fume at the atmosphere of the office, now was absorbed in the task before him. He was lost to everything. The cubicle might grow closer and closer, and the partitions more menacing; noises might arise, and distresses accumulate; still he worked on.

And thus it happened that Felix did not see Rhoda, dressed in her ugly grey coat, walk past the door of that office, her face deadly white, and her eyes fixed. She went straight through to the outer door, and disappeared. Felix heard nothing and saw nothing, although as she

passed Rhoda was not more than a yard from the door of his office. She did not raise her head as she went by.

viii

Only later, as he continued absorbed in what he was drawing up, Felix knew that Mr. Peters, the cashier, had edged his way into the room, and was bending over Mr. Dalton, saying something into his ear in a sort of half-whisper. Mr. Peters seldom came into the room, and as Felix did not care for him he took no interest in his coming. But something—perhaps a word caught by his ear, although his thoughts were elsewhere, caused Felix to look up. He had a glimpse of Mr. Peters's face. It was strangely discoloured—a deep red mottle of agitation making it unusually displeasing. That in itself was enough to attract further attention. And then Felix saw that although at first he had supposed Mr. Peters to be smiling the smile was a purely nervous contortion of the face, showing Mr. Peters to be very discomposed.

"Where is she now, then?" said Mr. Dalton, in a hushed voice.

"Oh, she's gone home . . ." came the answer.

She? About whom were they talking? Felix strained his ears. For him there was only one "she" in this office. Gone home? Ill? His heart stabbed.

"She's only a kid . . ." whispered Mr. Dalton.

"That's what I felt. I had to talk to her, of course. Only you see there's no knowing how much it is altogether. I told her . . ." The voice sank again. "It was when I asked if she'd like me to send for . . ."

Police! The word was like a hiss. Felix turned pale. He felt deadly sick. Peters . . . "she" . . . "Police" He was strangling . . . He could bear no more. Not

knowing what he was doing, Felix pushed back his chair and started to his feet.

"For God's sake," he stammered. "Who are you talking about?"

The two men looked at him. They saw his ghastly face, and the perspiration upon his brow. They did not need to answer his question. There was no doubt as to the one they spoke of.

"What's she been doing?" questioned Felix.

Peters closed the door of the room.

"Well, Felix," he said, in the same strained half-whisper. "Money. We don't know how much. Say a fiver. She swears she never did it before. She's gone. I mean, we shan't prosecute."

"Prosecute!" cried Felix. "That kid!" He could not breathe, so deeply had this shocked him. Only after a moment could he speak clearly again. "But what's she to do? If she's dismissed, without a reference . . ."

Mr. Peters looked down at the floor, and then up again at Felix. Some sort of shame was crowding upon him. He was uncomfortable. The tone of Felix, unexpected, impossible to be dealt with, was such as to move shame.

"Well," he said, too quietly to seem to be blustering, but all the same giving the impression that he was defending himself, "of course it's a pity, and all that; but it's no business of ours. She's been found taking money from the petty-cash, and making false entries. The least we could do was to get rid of her. It's a police court job, really. I ought to have prosecuted; but a young girl like that——"

Felix stared at Mr. Peters.

"Ought to have prosecuted!" he cried, with sudden fury. His cheeks were blazing. "You know what she's been earning—fifteen shillings a week. You must have known she couldn't keep herself on that. You *must*

have known. Think of it! You put a child in the way of temptation. You give her low wages and put cash in her hands. You tempt her; and then you say you ought to prosecute. When you know that you ought to have paid her properly." He turned away with a gesture of grief, of repugnance. He was bitterly unhappy.

"Look here, Felix . . ." began Mr. Peters.

"What have you done for her?" demanded Felix, hotly. His voice was still hoarse, because they all spoke very low. "Where's she gone?"

They did not answer him. He repeated the question.

"Home, I suppose," at last said Mr. Peters. "I told her we wouldn't do anything. Told her she couldn't stay. I wasn't—I mean, I talked to her straight; but I didn't bully her. She denied it at first; so I had to say would she rather I sent for the police. That frightened her."

He was recovering his relish in the narrative.

"What's to be done?" cried Felix. He was beside himself. His mind was gone to Rhoda. For these men he cared nothing. They were cyphers. But Rhoda . . . Alone, frightened, guilty . . . So paltry, so paltry, to yield to this temptation. . . . If only he had known—had known or thought or cared; she might have told him the difficulty; even, if matters had gone so far, confessed the taking. He could have helped. He would have been so proud to help. But this—sent away, frightened, guilty. Stupidly the words repeated themselves in his mind. He stood there in a dream, his anger fading and his horror stronger.

Mr. Peters put his hand to the door. He was panic-stricken at the view which Felix had suggested. "Just as well we didn't prosecute," he thought . . . Standing there, looking back, he eyed Felix with anxiety.

"Of course, you won't mention this yet," he said, with a struggling consciousness of being very decent over the whole business. "I let her go without any fuss. Said 'Just get your coat and hat on, my dear' . . ."

"My dear! Not to mention this yet!" Felix was contemptuous.

"You talk about not mentioning it," he said. "Why, you've run in here at once. And it's your fault . . ."

"My fault! What d'you mean?" demanded Mr. Peters, the mottling redoubled.

"For paying her fifteen——"

"Oh, shut up, Felix!" cried Dalton. "What are you getting yourself?"

"Twenty-five . . . And I'm . . ."

"Damn it, we can't go into everyone's circumstances," continued Dalton. "I'm sorry, and all that——"

"But you don't see what I mean. She had money through her hands," persisted Felix wearily.

"I checked it. I checked it each evening . . ." whispered Mr. Peters.

"But a kid like that. What would *you* have done?" They all looked uneasy and indignant. "What's to happen to her?"

They were impressed by his suggestion of disaster—of their responsibility for a life. There was a silence for several instants. Suddenly Peters had an inspiration. He turned quickly.

"Look here, you're upset about this, Felix. I don't wonder. I'm upset myself. It's enough to upset anybody. D'you know her? I mean . . . if she goes after a job—I'll . . . I'll give her a reference all right. Will you tell her that? Will you see her? Or I'll send her a line myself. That's the best way. Yes, I'll do that."

"Would you take her back, if I promise to repay the money?" cried Felix sharply.

ix

That evening he hurried as fast as he could go from the office to the road in which she lived. It was a common, respectable road of yellow-brick houses and lace curtains; and the house was not to be distinguished from its neighbours. But Felix knew it, and went straight to the front door. He knocked. There was no answer. He knocked a second time. At last, after a rustling, a slammed door, and silence, he saw two eyes peering through the glass panel nearest the lock. The door opened a few inches and an ugly woman with protruding teeth showed a triangular nose and one eye surmounted by a fierce eyebrow.

"Yes!" she demanded.

"Could I see Miss Melville?" asked Felix.

"Don't think she's home yet," said the woman. "Not her time."

"Oh, but—I'm from her office. She left the office early. She wasn't very well," stammered Felix. The woman disclosed her other eye, so that he could see the whole of her face.

"Ow," she drawled. "Well, I'll see. Wait 'ere."

She shut the door in his face. There was a silence. Felix waited with beating heart. Presently the door opened again, and the same displeasing face made its appearance.

"No: she's not 'ome," said the woman. "I expect she's gone for a walk. I should 'ave 'eard 'er if she'd bin 'ome. I bin 'ere all the afternoon. 'Er room's just as she left it."

Felix's heart sank. Foreboding seized him. Where could she be? At home? That was impossible. He shook his head sharply.

"Would you mind if I come round later, then?" he

asked. To his joy the woman looked no more grim than before.

"D'you mean you're goin' to keep on knockin' at the door?" she demanded. "All the evenin'?"

"Well, I hope she'll be in when I come again." There was a marked pause. At last the triangular nose gave a twitch, and the eyebrows were relaxed.

"All right. Don't make the step dirty."

"If she comes in, will you tell her I came? I've got good news for her, say. My name's Hunter."

"'Unter. All right." The door was closed again.

Felix was suddenly hopeful. The woman was not such a bad sort as he had feared. But what was to be done? With a heavy, thoughtful head he slowly climbed the hill. This was not a thing which he could yet confide to Ma, because at present it lay between Rhoda and himself. He passed a wretched couple of hours, feeling disinclined for the meal which had been prepared for him, and unable to do more than prowl about the neighbourhood in the vain hope of encountering the familiar little figure. At nine o'clock he ventured back to Rhoda's address.

The reply was the same.

"Where *can* she be?" wondered Felix. "It's . . ."

"Dunno, I'm sure," said the voice. "Gone out somewhere, I suppose."

"I *must* see her," he cried, desperately. "It's most awfully important."

"I 'aven't got her 'idden anywhere," said the woman, amused. "Else I'd fetch 'er out for you."

"Oh, don't laugh!" begged Felix. "I'm so afraid something's happened to her. She was ill and miserable. I . . . it's vitally important that I should see her tonight. *Awfully.*"

"Well, you can come back again, if you like," said

the voice. "Only I don't want to stand 'ere talkin' all night."

"Can I come later—quite late, then?"

"Yes, I shan't be goin' to bed before 'leven," said the voice. "Come round about quarter-to. She's sure to be in by then."

"May I?"

Their conversation ended. For a further two hours Felix walked hither and thither seeking Rhoda. The night had fallen, and he could see far in the moonlight; but the distortions of this white radiance lent only horror to his search. At times he thought he had a glimpse of her; but he was always mistaken. Another figure passed; a shadow swayed; an empty space betrayed her as a phantom. His mind was confused, and his heart full. If she had but known; if she had but guessed—such was the burden of his thoughts;—ever such a little word would have brought him to her aid, without any impulse to judge; with only the impulse to preserve. She had been silent; she had not dared; she had been too long lonely and friendless to believe that at last she had a friend.

There was no end to the torment of Felix's thoughts. They were fevered with hopelessness. A kind of sick dread was upon him. Weary, despondent, frightened, he went for the third time to the house. But he knew very well what the woman's answer would be. Rhoda had not returned. What if she never returned? Felix shuddered.

Felix never saw Rhoda again. Almost a week later she was found, dead, her face in a pool of water which lay hidden in a wood somewhere out beyond Potter's Bar.

PART THREE: THE YOUNG MAN

CHAPTER XI: STORM

i

IT was winter. Bleak winds swept London. Above could be seen a heavy sky, threatening sleet, and darkening each instant. At three o'clock in the afternoon all the electric lights at Brinksons were glowing yellow in the heated atmosphere. Felix felt that the dry warmth of the office was parching his scalp. He was already aware of a slight headache which might deepen into a steady infliction before the time came for going home. And before that time he must finish work which would have taken one less speedy than himself a day of reconnoitering. He looked over his shoulder, and saw Miss Berridge devotedly making entries in a register of electros; she was much older, but superficially she appeared to be unchanged. Her sight was shorter, and the treachery of the electric light was making her own entries blur as she wrote. Heat and stagnant atmosphere turned the whole of Brinksons into an area of parched dryness. Only Miss Berridge withstood its ageing effects. Mr. Dalton had passed long since, and at the age of four-and-twenty Felix was doing Mr. Dalton's work. Mr. Dalton was forgotten; nobody ever spoke of him or thought of him. Even Miss Berridge did not recall anything of his rambling stories of neglect. She had transferred her allegiance to Felix.

Darker and darker grew the land. Warmer and closer grew the office. The tall glass partitions seemed to come nearer to Felix as he worked, until he felt that he was

sitting in a funnel. He wrote and drew with quick fingers; and when he paused it was always because of an interruption from without. A canvasser would come into the cubicle and begin talking; letters would arrive; the telephone, at last installed in Brinksons' office, would buzz its signal for temper. And Felix would remain calm. He had practised remaining calm until it appeared that nothing could ruffle him. Calmness was largely, he found, a matter of convention. Anger was a gift which increased with its exercise. And as Felix was beginning to husband his nervous energy he restricted his output of displayed anger.

Six years had changed him. There was no longer the same fresh eagerness in his manner, and he was more sedentary. Close work under artificial light, both at the office and at home, had affected his eyesight, and he wore pince-nez. He was better dressed. His hair was thinner, and there were lines (possibly only lines of laughter) about his mouth. Otherwise, a little more sturdy of figure, and a little less quick in movement, he was recognisably the Felix of eighteen. He was still clean shaven, and his complexion was still very clear. In the office he was popular; but his tongue was feared. Miss Berridge was much more his slave than she had ever been the slave of Mr. Dalton. For her he had not only the rightness and helplessness of all men, but he was in addition the marvellous boy. Miss Berridge, in fact, was the first believer of the great Felix legend.

The great Felix legend was that Felix was unlike any other person in the world. Felix, with his insatiable vanity, has never seen any reason to question this legend. He ridicules it; but I have never observed that he considers it baseless. Miss Berridge was certainly a pioneer in its creation.

ii

At last came the end of the office day. One by one, or in rushes, the staff at Brinksons left the building. Even Miss Berridge disappeared. Felix was alone, or almost alone. Presently he, too, put away his papers, and rose, stretching his arms and legs in a voluptuous yawn. The cubicle in which Felix worked had natural light only by reflection, and he could not see from it into either of the streets upon which the windows of Brinksons looked. And it was therefore not until he reached the front door that he knew of the storm which greeted him there. Vehement lashings of hail poured upon the pavement, leaping a couple of feet from the ground in recoil. There was an alarming silence; only the hissing of the hail and the running of torrent-laden gutters struck Felix's ear. He paused in the doorway, watching the storm. Useless at present to venture out into it, as he had a ten minutes' walk to Farringdon Street and his tramcar. Not yet had Felix reached the point of riding in cabs.

So he waited within the doorway of Brinksons, smelling the sourness of London streets under rain. And as he waited the hail ceased, and was succeeded by driving rain and sleet. He could see it in the faint light radiated from the lamp above Brinksons' door. It was silvered and whitened by the lamplight, and no longer spattered up sharply from the pavement, but drove shiveringly into the porch, hideously wet and repulsive. Felix, chilled by the onset, drew back a step. Then, with his collar up and his hands deep in the pockets of his thick winter overcoat, he plunged suddenly out into the street, walking with his head lowered until the turning of a corner changed the quarter from which he received the buffetings of the storm.

The streets at first seemed to be empty. Then for a time there was a jostling and running for crowded omnibuses at Ludgate Circus, ghastly and nightmare-like under the piercing eyes of the great lamps; a roaring of motor-engines and of trains passing across the railway-bridge; and peace again. The storm did not slacken. Felix trudged through it, happy and warm. The sting of bitter rain upon his cheeks was magnificent, and the icy wind made him imagine himself at sea upon such a night. To the sailor the prospect might have been disagreeable; to Felix it was otherwise. To him the reeling of a boat, the sweeping green waters about his knees, the spray and rain and wind in his eyes, and the tempestuous blackness of the night, broken only by the white crests of venomous waves yet to be encountered, would have been paradisal. At the picture in his mind, Felix smiled in delight, his strong white teeth bared, and his face wet by the storm. His soft hat was pulled down over his eyes, his shoes were nowadays impervious to wet, his coat was amply protective.

And so the journey was made, and his goal reached. The top of the tramcar reeked with the smoke of shag; damp and warmth gave clamminess to everything that was touched, to the hand-rail, the back of the seat, the coats of those who pushed roughly by to their places. The raised windows of the car streamed with the splashing wet of rain upon the outside and the condensation of moisture within. Choked and conscious of being sodden with rain, the occupants of the upper deck were all alike depressed and sullen. They shrank from each other, from the smears of wet, and wriggled within their sticky and uncomfortable clothes. They glowered at two friends who had met and were talking in loud, jovial voices about their families and their friends as if there were no storm and no swamp-like atmosphere to poison

the hearts of men. They were all brusque in seating themselves and rising up again, transferring to their fellow-sufferers responsibility for the common distress. Felix had a vision of the occupants of the upper deck of this tramcar. He became æsthetically aware of them, pervaded by an imagination of their stifled rebellion against the inevitable. Suffering himself, he transcended suffering. He made the magic of creation, and in this subtle magic they became the basis of a picture which had been born in Felix's vision. Rembrandtesque, perhaps; but typically Hunterian also. No question of that.

iii

The tramcar pitched its way along the poorly lighted streets. Felix could not tell whereabouts he was, for the old man next to him, and next the window, had a big bag of tools between his legs and a couple of boards, about six feet in length, standing upon end in the bag of tools. He was a gnarled and grimy old man, with a shabby billycock hat and enormous hairy fingers and a face like a bloodhound; and Felix did not like him. The old man was breathing through his mouth, and every breath was a hiss that expressed age and resentment. But even Felix could realise that a slight surliness, a disposition to occupy the whole seat, was a state of mind very natural in the circumstances. He would not himself have cared to be caught in a storm carrying planks and a heavy bag of tools. That was admitted. But then, what was *this* old man doing it for? A wager? No. Necessity? Two planks, at this time of the year . . . They would build nothing but bookshelves: was the old man bookish? Was the tool-bag filled with purchases from the bookstalls along Farringdon Street? The supposition was unacceptable.

The old man must have stolen these boards. They were the nucleus of a henhouse. He would steal, or had stolen, wire-netting to cover the front of the henhouse. He was going to cramp chickens in a yard of space, feed them upon kitchen refuse, expect them to lay eggs, and then sell at fabulous prices to invalids the produce of these scrofulous chickens. Felix looked askance at the old man.

The old man was troubled with indigestion. He was a disagreeable companion for a disagreeable journey. Felix looked to see whether there was another seat near to which he could transfer his person, far from the boards and the bag of tools. But by this time the tram-car was full. The smoke thickened; the damp streamed; perspiration rose to Felix's forehead. Wet began to trickle from the brim of his hat. It needed all his natural fortitude to endure this torture without shouting at the old man. And in this condition of unhappiness Felix was aware of the stoppages of the car, of its progress into the unknown. Only when the surly old man, grunting and hissing, gathered his planks in one arm and his bag in the other, and pushed ferociously out of his place, shouting to the conductor in a senile frenzy, did Felix by guesswork ascertain the tram's position. A shudder, half of coldness and wetness, half of repulsion from the old man's dirt and rudeness, shook him.

iv

How almost exaggeratedly warm and full of peace did home seem upon his arrival. The Hunters had moved again, and were in a cottage near their old rooms; and the increasing income of the family had enabled them to furnish it cosily and to choose their own wallpapers. It was a small place, and the rooms were small; but there

were three bedrooms and one room which Felix could use as a studio; and the living-room was a large one. They had a piano now, and thick carpet upon the floor; and in the grate as Felix entered was glowing a fine fire. A little cat was stretched luxuriously in front of the fire—not Tip, but a tabby cat of the name of Squiffins; and Squif rolled right over in order to greet Felix. He drew his forepaws archly up, and cocked his head, lazily conscious of charm. The curtains were drawn; upon the dining-table was spread a meal; electric light was the illumination. All was bright and warm. Apart from an occasional spattering of rain upon the window there was nothing here to suggest that the night outside was one of storm.

And as Felix, having taken off his boots and assumed his warm slippers, stooped to address Squif, a little daily-maid of about sixteen pushed open the door and advanced with her button-nose in the air and a hot dish in her hands. Her cheeks were shiny and red. She was plump and independent. "What say?" she would call to Ma, when Ma lost her and tried to discover what she was doing. "I'm up 'ere. Mist' Felix's room . . . *dustin'.*" Her idea of dusting was sitting still and looking through Felix's sketches. She liked Felix. "There's a lot that's very womanly about Mist' Felix," she had remarked, making every "s" the sort of hiss that ill-bred people use in order to recall a waitress. "'E's a man in a million." When she saw Felix she smiled respectfully and patronisingly. "'Ere's yer dinner," she remarked. "I'll take them boots." She did so. Her feeling of respect for Felix contrasted strangely with her contempt for Godfrey. When milk boiled over on to the scullery floor, Ma once asked her how she thought **such** an accident could have happened. "I expect it's Mist' Godfrey," said young Else, virtuously.

Felix, surprised that Ma had not come in from the kitchen, seated himself before the covered plate. A savoury dinner was already served upon it, and when the mark of Elsie's thumb had been removed with a napkin the dish was most tempting. He sat demurely eating. He had his mouth full of food, and was still wondering why Ma did not come upstairs, when the door opened again. Ma entered the room, and Squif ran hopefully towards her with his tail in the air.

Ma was much plumper than she had been. Although she was still active, she looked her fifty-four years. Only the unquenchable clearness of her eyes and skin gave her the look of youth. And upon this occasion she was perhaps less cheerful than usual. Preoccupation showed in her manner. Her first glance was for Felix, and her gesture of welcome was cordial. She was dressed in brown with a little fine lace at her neck. Her hair was rough, and defied her attempts to control it.

"Wretched evening," cried Ma; and it might have been Felix himself who spoke, so alike were their voices. "I thought of you on the wet tram."

"Yes, rotten. I came up beside a horrid old man." Felix gave her a description of the old man with the planks and the bag of tools. His fancy embroidered the reminiscence. It seemed quite a pleasant and amusing affair. Ma was noticing his rather tired aspect.

"Had a hard day?" she asked. And then: "I've got some news."

"Good news?"

"Not altogether. Perhaps it is; though I don't know how you'll feel about it." She moved over to the sideboard. Felix saw her take a folded paper from behind a bowl containing flowers. "This is it," she said, handing the paper to him.

Felix read: "Arriving tonight Julie." A slight frown was lost in satisfaction.

"Oh, that's excellent," he said. "Aunt Julie. Why, what a long time it must be. It must be . . . almost . . . fifteen . . . no, surely it's quite sixteen years since she was in London. It was just before I had diphtheria: don't you remember? We all went to see 'The Mikado' . . . Oh, excellent. We'll . . . Why, aren't you glad?"

"Very glad—oh, very glad," answered Ma, unconvincingly. "I'm only thinking—I've not heard from her, or of her, for so long . . . wondering if she'll be changed. All sorts of things."

"Arriving tonight. Does she know where to come? Liverpool . . . why, she might be here any minute!" cried Felix. "Where's she going to sleep?"

"Godfrey's room. If he comes home next weekend she must have a bed in mine."

Now, why wasn't Ma glad? Was she dreading the visit for any reason? If she had had no letter, why should she dread it? Felix was perplexed at his own supposition.

"How long will she stay?" he next demanded.

"I don't know. I know nothing but what's there."

Felix thoughtfully folded the telegram up again, and went on eating his dinner.

"I really ought to go and meet her," he thought. He had the picture of a very charming little woman in his mind—a vague recollection of earlier days and of photographs taken since. But Aunt Julie had been at the other end of the earth for twenty years, and his actual memory was faint.

"It doesn't say if Uncle Bernard is coming, too," suddenly cried Felix.

"No," answered Ma, still in that cautious, unenthusiastic tone. "No, it doesn't."

"Well, damn it!" said her son. "I wish you seemed a bit more delighted to see her!"

Ma possibly might have answered; but at that moment they heard the jingle of harness and the crushing sound of gravel in the roadway outside. A vehicle was driving in the road; it was coming; it was passing; it had stopped. There was a faint dump. Then more jingling of harness.

Ma hurried to the window. Felix looked out into the pouring night, staring over Ma's shoulder. There could be no doubt of it. A carriage of some sort stood without, and its oil lamps were visible through the downpour. With one accord, the two left the window and moved quickly to the door. Felix, the more impetuous, reached the front door in advance of Ma, and as a heavy gust of wind and rain battered against it, he opened it. The storm rushed into the house.

v

There in front of the garden-gate stood a four-wheeled cab; and the driver was standing up in his place dragging at a big box or trunk. Two portmanteaux already stood in the rain. Felix, at first stepping out into the storm without protection, was pulled back by Ma. At her indignant warning he put on a cap and a mackintosh, and as he was doing this a little figure staggered up the steps and stood embracing Ma. The figure was drawn into the cosy room from which Ma and Felix had lately come, while Felix dashed out to help the cabman. Together they managed to lower the trunk to the ground and to drag it into the hall. It stood, a massive structure with protective hoops, under the pale light. The portmanteaux were disposed upon it; and Felix paid the cabman.

"You'll get a drink at the corner," he said, adding a

shilling to the tip; and the cabman saluted and withdrew. Felix looked at the trunk and the portmanteaux, and was ruffling his hair in doubt as to what he should do with them, when Elsie came from the kitchen. With superb generalship Elsie assumed command of the situation.

"Want them took upstairs?" she demanded. "I'll take 'em. No, not you: mustn't 'urt yourself."

Together they got the portmanteaux up to Godfrey's bedroom. Here there was already a fire, and the little bed had upon it the eiderdown quilt which Felix had given Ma as a present at the previous Christmas. The room was not fine, but it was cheerful. Upon the mantelpiece stood photographs of Godfrey in various rôles. There was also a huge mirror, propped upon wooden supports, which occupied the space between door and window. The decorations were all a light brown, and the woodwork was white. The frame of the mirror, which had once been gilt, had been enamelled white. The bed, which was pushed away into a corner, was also enamelled white; but Elsie's fingers had left their marks. Before descending, Felix looked all round the room, and he thought his aunt would be hard to please if, coming from the restricted spaces of a ship's cabin, she did not feel that this was an agreeable change.

And then he went downstairs, and entered the living room. Ma was there, with a stranger. The stranger was a little white-haired woman, dressed in a smart tailor-made gown of grey. She looked quite old—older than Ma, although in reality she was younger. She looked old and frail and pathetically emaciated. When Felix appeared her eyes were full of tears, and he had a curious glimpse of her. He did not like tears; he dreaded them; but they suited this *petite* face, and the travel-worn air she carried. They were the unrestrainable sign of the emotion she must be feeling at being home once more,

with Ma, and the sense that she was altogether with her own folk, after twenty years of wandering in a strange world of unfamiliar faces. Aunt Julie was distinctly charming, felt Felix. He stepped forward to kiss her, and was convulsively clasped.

"Let me look at you. Let me look at you," cried a trembling voice. It seemed that Aunt Julie was greatly agitated. "I should have known you," she said with emotion. "Anywhere—oh, anywhere. Such a big chap . . ." There was a pause; at the end of which, in a weak, feeble voice that was almost inarticulate, she wailingly added: "Goodness gracious; it's months since I've seen anybody laugh . . ."

"Has she had anything to eat, Ma?" demanded Felix.

Ma was standing near, happily smiling. All the warm kindness and affection of her nature was evident. She had removed Aunt Julie's overcoat and shoes, and had supplied her with slippers. Aunt Julie had removed her own hat, and her white hair streamed in curling tendrils like those of the ineradicable convolvulus.

"Don't want anything," cried Aunt Julie, vigorously. "I dined on the train—oh! what a journey. I couldn't eat. I tried, but I couldn't. I thought I should have sickened to death. Getting into Liverpool was bad enough; but the railroad!" She indicated that it was beyond description. "And where's Godfrey?"

"Touring. You know he's an actor?" They watched her, radiantly, quite ready to be diverted by her sensations at hearing such news. Their mischievous glances met and returned to the visitor.

"No! Actor!" Aunt Julie's first expression was not one of pleasure. But she conquered any repugnance she might have had to the idea, and cried out, as if in joyous amaze: "An actor! Godfrey! Well, I never!" She clutched her straggling white hair in mock-bewilderment.

"I've heard so many things since I arrived, and laughed so much, and talked so much, that . . ." Really, it was clear that Aunt Julie was again moved to the point of tears by such an embarrassment of riches. It was too much for her. She was sated with new impressions and with information. She sat down abruptly in an armchair. "Oh, isn't it *nice!*" she exclaimed. There was a beam in her voice, a drooping fragility in her aspect, a helpless pathos and eagerness, which went straight to Felix's heart.

Poor little thing! he thought.

vi

When this book opened, some account was given of Ma's younger sister, Auntie Lallums; but very little was said about Ma's second sister, Julie. This was because, apart from one visit to London when Felix was eight, Aunt Julie had been vaguely somewhere at the other end of the world during the whole of his life. She had married when Felix was a year old, and had departed immediately for America with her husband. Her marriage desolated a number of excellent young men in England to whom she had been engaged or half-engaged; and it was followed by a long silence on the part of the bride. Aunt Julie presently wrote to announce her arrival in New York, and added that she and her husband were going west. How far west they had gone was not known until many months later. It was not known with exactitude even then, for Aunt Julie was not an explicit correspondent. She wrote in vague terms: "It's all too wonderful!" she said. Ma, having a preference for candour and strict geographical reference, concluded in those days that the marriage had proved early to be an unhappy one.

Strong bonds united Ma to Julie; for Ma had nursed her sister back to life as a young girl after several doctors had declared that Julie would not live. Julie was thus, in a special degree, the beloved sister of Ma. To the boys, owing to her mysterious absence and the charming photographs of her which were among their mother's treasures, Aunt Julie had always figured as a fairy princess. At times presents had come from her, dropping carelessly, as it were, from the lap of profusion. Handsome books, even gifts of money, had arrived without warning at breakfast time, bearing beautiful postage-stamps from all sorts of distant places. How could they do otherwise than reverence the memory of one who had shed light in darkness? Aunt Julie was a fairy, a delightful ethereal creature in the far distances of the earth; and her occasional letters were treasured as priceless, partly because of their rarity, partly because they told of unvarying happiness.

Gradually letters from Aunt Julie at the other side of the world grew fewer and fewer. From the time Felix was fourteen they had reached the Hunters at very long intervals indeed. Ma at first had worried at the intervals and at the unsatisfactory brevity of the letters which ultimately arrived; and then, as time elapsed, and as at length a letter of a few lines always came, from a new address, and occasionally without address at all, Ma's sense of anxiety was allayed. She herself wrote very regularly, when she could afford to buy a stamp for the purpose, and the letters were seldom returned through the post. And when Julie wrote during this period, she said she had been ill, but was better; that she and Bernard were going up country; that everything was splendid; that last night at dinner she had been placed at the right hand of a judge; that she often thought of them all at home; that she was ridiculously happy. . . .

Finally, for the last two years, until this moment, there had been no letter at all; and Ma, seeing Julie for the first time for sixteen years, and for the greater part of that period having been ignorant of the smallest detail in her sister's daily experience, saw before her, with grief, an old woman, an old and weary and discouraged woman, to whom life had been hard, to whom it had been unendurably bitter.

Presently, when they had sat over the fire for nearly an hour and disjointedly, with many silences through loss of intimacy, had talked a little, Ma insisted that Aunt Julie should go to bed and rest; and Felix again received a passionate, clinging kiss from his aunt, and turned quickly away in order that she might not know that he had seen the tears running from her eyes. When she had gone, he stood looking down at the fire, rather moved in his turn, and hearing footsteps above as Ma went with the visitor for the second time that evening into Godfrey's warm room. There was a long silence, broken by Elsie's entry to collect the dishes from the dining-table. She stamped across the room, thereby awaking Felix from the reverie into which he had fallen. Entirely alert, he fixed his eyes sternly upon her.

"Here, you ought to have gone home long ago, Elsie!" he cried.

"It's all right, Mist' Felix," hissed Elsie, with her nose in the air. "You don't 'ave a' aunt come *every* day of the week. Excuses a lot . . . I've 'ad some cocoa."

And with that she withdrew, clattering into the kitchen with her outdoor boots on. Ma descended just as Elsie, carrying her nose in the air with a sense of great virtue, was going home. She came breathlessly into the living-room and closed the door quickly behind her. To Felix it seemed almost as though she shuddered.

"All well?" he asked, cheerfully.

Ma regarded him with affection, coming straight to the fire and sitting in her own chair.

"Yes, all well," she answered, reassuringly. "She's in bed with a hot bottle. I hope she'll be warm enough. And then, as if with a quick intaking of the breath: "Poor thing."

vii

Within another hour, Ma and Felix also separated. Felix clicked off the light, and bolted the front door, and then went up to his bedroom. It was at the top of the house, and opened into his studio. The ceilings sloped; the floors of both rooms were stained, and upon each there was only a single Indian rug. There was a shivering dampness in the room which caught his breath as he entered. Felix with some speed pulled his money and his watch and keys and pocket-book and tobacco-pouch out of their respective pockets, and laid them jingling upon the dressing-table. Then, struck by an impulse, he went into his studio and sat down at the desk there. It was warmer in the studio, because the window had been closed; and for a few moments, in spite of the beating upon the slates overhead, Felix forgot the storm. An instant's thought recalled the scene upon the top deck of the tram to his mind; and he made a few rough notes for the drawing he had planned. These done, he re-entered his chilly bedroom. He yawned, sighed, began slowly to undress. In at the wide-open window was blown some wind and sleet. The atmosphere was icy, with a penetrating chill that made him shudder. He stooped and looked out of the window. Everything was black, and where the lamps cast any reflection at all he could see instead of nothingness a sort of dull, ugly shining. The noisy running of water in the gutters chilled Felix yet more. He hastened his un-

dressing and slipped nimbly into his pyjamas and into bed. Vague memories of the day floated through his head—Miss Berridge, Mackson's order . . . little boy blowing a horn as their trade-mark. . . . And the asphyxiating closeness of the office; the few moments' wait in Brinksons' porch; the run to the tram; the old man with the planks and the bag of tools; home, and the telegram and Aunt Julie. . . . The noise of the storm lulled him. A blustering wind arose. A door banged and the steady rain continued to fall in little faint stabblings of sound . . . Near and far, near and . . . far. Aunt Julie, crying . . . Poor thing. Sad, exhausted, emaciated poor thing; pitiable . . . But why cry? Rain, rain, never-ending, an unceasing sound upon his window, and a few drops upon his floor. The wind rising and falling, as his chest was slowly and regularly doing, as if in concert with the wind and the spattering rain. Then nothing at all. Felix was asleep.

CHAPTER XII: COMING EVENTS

i

THE coming of Aunt Julie made a great difference to the little household. She was up the next morning as early as any of them, and at breakfast in a pretty morning-gown, entirely restored by her good night's rest. Her bed, she announced, was the most comfortable she had ever slept in; and her room most delightful. Everything, in fact, was ideal. Even the storm had not prevented her from sleeping; and now that the storm had passed, and the only sign that was left of it was the clean-swept road, she was charmed with the outlook from her window. The road was pretty, she said, and in summer must be enchanting. And the fact that the house was as high as the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, and therefore had such fine air, was a source of great satisfaction. She brought down to breakfast some fine embroidery upon which she was engaged, on purpose to display one of her gifts to a sympathetic spectator, and followed Ma from room to room, full of talk and enthusiasm. Her voice, her little high laugh, could be heard from whichever room she happened to be in. She was like a crowd. It was late when Felix sat down to breakfast. Aunt Julie had insisted upon making him a special kind of omelette. It took longer to cook than any other kind of omelette, and was twice the size of any that Felix had ever seen. She stood over Felix as he ate it, waiting with professional anxiety for his verdict upon her skill.

"Is that all right, Felix?" she asked, in a tone of dignified—almost superior—inquiry.

"Marvellous," he agreed—terribly amused at the whole business, but snapping his fingers with exasperation at the delay.

"I *thought* you'd like it," Felix heard Aunt Julie say. "I always used to make them for Uncle Bernard."

Then they all sat down, and Ma poured out the tea.

"I'm afraid you're late, old chap," she said, in passing his cup. Felix nodded, and looked hastily at his watch. An unuttered groan stirred within him. This was ghastly. It was already nine o'clock. He would not reach the office by half-past nine; but he must run down the hill, and perhaps he would save time also at the other end of his journey. Aunt Julie did not seem to notice the lateness; but she was very concerned to be sure that Ma had as much breakfast as possible. She watched Ma's appetite as a cat watches a mousehole—obtrusively unobtrusive in her thoughtfulness of others.

"Anything will do for me," she said, with a grand air of unselfishness. "I eat very little."

"That's what you look like," answered Ma, bluntly.

"Oh," said Aunt Julie, politely. For such a small woman, she had, when she was polite, a rather deep voice. Felix noticed at once, from this "Oh," that Aunt Julie took herself rather seriously; and as one piece of observation leads to another he further noticed that she was much more refined than either Ma or himself. Her voice had distinct modulations; her pronunciation was fastidious; hearing her, one could not doubt that she had often sat at the right hand of bishops and judges and all the other dignitaries who figured in her reminiscences of social success. And yet it seemed to Felix that Aunt Julie's pronunciation was not precisely that of the best-bred English whom he had met or overheard. These, he thought, spoke

carelessly, running their words together; with them the distinction from bourgeois speech was entirely one of tone. Whereas Aunt Julie picked her syllables and had a slight sententiousness of manner which was peculiar.

"The Judge," she said, with a kind of unction, "was always most particular whom he dined with. I had the greatest difficulty in making up my parties. There weren't half-a-dozen families in the whole town who could be asked to meet him." And with that she looked complacent and dignified. Was Felix deceiving himself, or did Aunt Julie say "to meet um"?

"I thought everybody in North America was either a Judge or a Colonel," remarked Felix. "In books, they seem to be."

"Oh, no!" cried Aunt Julie, in horror. "Good gracious!" While Ma knew that his remark had been mischievous, Aunt Julie had no suspicion of it. She looked at Felix with doubt clear in her face. "Why, the Judge——"

"I *must* go!" cried Felix, rising. "Excuse me, Aunt Julie." He ran.

On his hurried journey down the hill towards the tram, Felix suddenly laughed. It had struck him that Aunt Julie's peculiarly refined speech was the English of one who had been long absent from England. It was preserved English. And what made it the more singular was that against Aunt Julie's will there obtruded every now and then, as she spoke, such an unmistakable tang of Grumps and of Grumps's way of speaking, as to betray her Scottish origin. And so the language of Aunt Julie was hybrid. It was like nothing on earth. Felix realised that Aunt Julie was a most interesting woman, and only his natural politeness, which was of thought as well as of demeanour, prevented him from wishing to exploit her peculiarities, in order to relish them with the greater en-

joyment. Still, even if she were seriously English in other respects, Felix was attracted to the visitor. He had never met anybody like her.

ii

At night he discovered more about Aunt Julie. He discovered that she was very patriotic. "It's not Anglish," she said, referring to some piece of sharp practice. "It happens every day in England," answered Felix. "Oh, no," she was sure it did not. Felix ventured to give an example. "I don't believe it," announced Aunt Julie. She was patriotic and she was loyal. Pictures of Queen Victoria, or of the new King and Queen, delighted her. Edward the Seventh was her ideal English gentleman. She spoke upon the theme for some time that evening, as they all sat round the fire in the big living-room and Felix smoked his pipe, mildly amused at the turn which the conversation had taken. Jacob Harcourt, who had called after dinner, and who was one of the cosy group, sitting bolt upright in his chair and refusing to smoke because he was limiting himself to two pipes a day, was astounded; but that was because he was an anarchist, and imagined that supporters of the monarchy were all dishonest cynics. Jacob was the old Jacob, but if anything he was blunter than ever. The sturdy frame had filled out a little more, and Jacob's face was seamed with lines. Even thus early, so hard did Jacob take life, there were grey hairs at his temples. Somehow Jacob's integrity, which shamed Felix, was accompanied by serious intellectual effort. He was not easy, and fluent, as Felix was; but his ideas were hard-bitten. He seized them and kept them. They did not float into oblivion, as did Felix's ideas. Jacob was a grim fellow, as well as a young man of the revolutionary

cast. He said, answering Aunt Julie's enthusiastic praise of Edward the Seventh:

"Don't you think it's a scandalous waste to keep up a great show of kingship when there's children dying of starvation all over England, Mrs. Webley?"

Aunt Julie did not. She invited Jacob to come out of his poky Socialistic back-parlour into the greater world of Angland. Prophetically echoing—as it were—the later words of Mr. Kipling, she demanded, "Who dies if Angland live?" She demonstrated that the King was a symbol, that if there were no king of Angland all the subject races of the British Empire would rebel against our Government and overthrow British world supremacy. "All," she said, "that Angland stands for."

"Wouldn't that be a good thing?" asked Jacob, upon whom chivalrousness forced the Socratic method. "Get rid of this swollen domineering idea of Empire, which means monopolies for the wealthy, and not health and happiness for the workers. All this vulgar plutocratic stuff that Kipling stands for."

"Destroy the British Empire!" exclaimed Aunt Julie. "Why——" She was speechless. She, too, had imagined that all who did not embrace her own faith, which was that of British Imperialism and Gentility, were dishonest. She had divided them into paid agitators (financed by a foreign power—probably German) and the exploited, unwashed masses; with whom, as she said, "you could never do anything at all—except bath them till they squealed the true credo." Jacob was a revelation to her, as Felix, looking on at this debate, wickedly realised. Felix was chuckling to himself at the scene, at Jacob's restrained seriousness, at Aunt Julie's suppressed and fuming indignation. It was ridiculous enough. Jacob became explanatory:

"You see, Mrs. Webley," he earnestly said, "I don't

want to be rude, and all that; but I think there ought to be a different way of carrying on the world. It can't be right that a large proportion of the population should be under-fed, that their homes should be pigstyes"

"If you gave them anything better they wouldn't thank you. They *like* pigstyes."

"Oh!" There were three nettling cries of protest, which showed Aunt Julie that she was in a nest of political perverts.

"Well, as to that I don't agree," pursued the stolid Jacob. "However, I'll admit this. If you're going to go on in the old way, governing by force of arms, and one nation competing with another, then I'd rather England did it than any other nation."

"Oh, you would!" Aunt Julie looked satirically at him. She allowed an exasperating smile to cross her face, and disposed herself with an appearance of arch commiseration; but that was because she had mistaken her opponent, who was in no way to be affected by drawing-room tactics. To him Aunt Julie's smile was no more than the sickly grin of one already conscious of error.

"Yes, I would," confirmed Jacob, in his sturdy way. "I feel we've got a Parliament, and though it's a rum sort of machine I do feel that it can be harried by public opinion."

"Hullo," said Felix. "Isn't that something new for you, Jacob?"

"Well, Felix; it is and it isn't. I'd rather make a clean sweep, as you know. But I've only just realised how frightened Government offices are of having questions asked in Parliament. That shows there must be something in it. I'm very much impressed by that. Of course, there's too much gentility in our House of Commons. There's too much gentility all the way round. The Public

School, and University, and Club influence. 'Don't ask this question: it would embarrass the Government' sort of thing. You want a redistribution of wealth and a ruthless Opposition. Then we might begin again with representative government, I think. I'm not sure about it, though. I'm still thinking. The great thing is to get rid of the present humbugs."

"Don't you think it would be better to wait until you've decided what ought to be done, before you attack what is, Mr. Harcourt?" interrupted Aunt Julie with spirit. "One knows this spirit of revolt and discontent so well. One's seen it so often. The young hot-headed people—as they grow older and wiser they think better of it."

Jacob smiled as he shook his head.

"They lose conviction, Mrs. Webley," he said. "They find a niche for themselves, and don't want to shift. It's not that they get wiser. Only fatter."

"Oh, dear me!" cried Aunt Julie, with a declamatory groan. "What pessimism! No, no. Have a little confidence in human nature, Mr. Harcourt, I beg! They come in contact with reality. Ah, one's seen it . . . *I've* seen it. Handsome boys, burning with indignation at some imaginary injustice . . . And in the end they've said to me,"—she repeated the remarks with a delicate unction, her eyes almost closed, and her head back—" 'You were right, Mrs. Webley. You were right all the time. You're *always* right.' "

There was an effective pause, the spirit of which was not, however, in accordance with Aunt Julie's plan.

"I'm afraid I'm not likely to say that," said Jacob, slowly, with a reluctant smile.

Aunt Julie turned from him with an air of impatient disdain.

"I was only telling you what *they* said," she answered.

iii

Felix took Jacob up to the studio. It seemed safer.

"Sit there, you rascal," he said. "And look as if you had a bag of tools between your feet and a couple of planks standing up in the tool-bag."

"I say, I hope I wasn't rude, Felix," began Jacob, as he obediently seated himself and was arranged in the necessary pose for Felix's object. Felix, slightly preoccupied, was holding his pencil before him, perpendicularly, and squinting at Jacob.

"I was afraid you might be," he drawled; "so I brought you up here."

"Your aunt's got strong views. Well, perhaps so have I."

"Not so much views as convictions," remarked Felix. "And not so much convictions as crass obstinacy."

"Hers or mine?" asked Jacob. He dodged in time to avoid a sketch book, and then stubbornly resumed his pose. "I say, that might have given me a nasty jab, Felix. Aren't you sorry? Oh, and by the way, there's a chap at our office knows you—at least, that's not quite exact. I ought to have said——"

"Keep your damned old head steady. You waggle your head when you talk, Jacob."

"Do I?"

"When you argue, or correct yourself. It's a mark of pig-headedness. Pigs do it. Have you ever noticed?"

"No. And I don't believe you have."

"You watch them next time they're having a pow-wow. And what was that about your knowing somebody who doesn't exactly know me but in a manner of speaking does in fact not know me?"

"Well, there's a chap at our office who's a most bigoted Tory, d'ye see. And so we've had one or two spars, and

as he lives down in Holloway here we've once or twice come part of the way home together. And the other night he asked me to go along there to his house, to some sort of party. Well, of course I said I couldn't go, and all that; but, however, in the end I went, and found a lot of half-educated people in the house all strumming on the piano or making fools of themselves some other way. And I got talking with this chap's sister, who seems a taking little thing, and I was sitting talking to her——"

"For God's sake hurry up," cried Felix. "My fingers are trembling so that I can't hold the pencil. Tell me who she was. A beautiful girl, was she?"

"Yes," said Jacob, in his unshakably deliberate and ruminative manner. "I think you'd call her beautiful. At any rate, I was sitting there talking to her——"

"Why, you've sat there the whole evening already."

"Jealousy's a passion you should curb, Felix," observed Jacob, resuming his narrative once again. "And I was talking to this girl about a lot of queer things I'd come across; and somehow I mentioned you, d'ye see——"

"Hell!" cried Felix. "Somehow!"

"And she says 'I know him'; or 'I used to know him.' "

"Who on earth——?"

"So I said 'Oh, I know him very well.' "

"Like your sauce!" cried Felix indignantly. "Boasting like that. However, she'll find you out, my lad. Never fear."

"And she said 'Oh, I wish I could meet him again. It's years since we met,' she said. 'He was a bonny blue-eyed boy, and I was a kitchen slave.' "

Felix had a T-square in his hand, and he stood over his tormentor with a vengeful gleam in his eye which there could be no mistaking.

"Shut up, you old image!" he cried. "Who *was* this absurd minx?"

"She sent you a message. 'Ask him,' she said, 'if he remembers me?'" A jab of the T-square hastened Jacob's recollection of the missing name. Grabbing the T-square as his chair shot backwards, he gasped the words in falling. "Estelle Ferguson," said Jacob, breathlessly.

iv

"Estelle Ferguson." At first, Felix did not remember the name. Then, gradually, there stole back into his mind a memory of nine years before—of a fragile little girl with blue eyes and golden hair, who wore a dress of pearl-grey muslin, and whose fingers, except that they had not red tips, were like those of a beautiful wax model. In a flash, once he had recalled the aspect of her person, Felix remembered more. He remembered how she had made an appointment with him and had broken it.

"What!" he cried. "Is she not married yet?"

"No," briefly responded Jacob. "Not yet."

"Very fair—like a sweet little doll?" Felix had an inspiration. "Yes," he said, in a high voice of the smallest volume he could achieve: "Yes, one *does* feel awful when people do those sort of things . . ."

"Exact!" shouted Jacob, in the highest glee. "That's exact."

Felix pondered. He had cast her off, he now recalled, for that one back-sliding. More recent experience of the feminine sex had shown him that in this act he had been hard—even rigid—even priggish. His belief was now that a woman, unless she be Ma or Miss Berridge, must be regarded as a child, as an irresponsible.

"It's a curious thing, Jacob," Felix remarked. "I like girls and I like men. I don't care for boys, and I'm not keen on women."

"That must be because you're an old maid," slowly retorted Jacob.

Felix conned the insult, seeking to discover if it had any germ of truth.

"I don't think I'm quite that," he urged, at which Jacob burst into merriment. "I doubt if old maids like girls. But there may be some other defect. I may not much care for women cleverer than myself."

"You needn't be afraid," remarked Jacob, still insulting.

"I *think* women don't interest me much intellectually. And if I want to kiss anybody it's generally, I find, somebody younger than myself. That's like a *roué*, isn't it?"

"Well, Miss Ferguson is a girl," suggestively answered Jacob. "And she's certainly made up her mind to meet you again. She's bent on it."

"Um." Felix grunted. "Was there a chap called Jack Howell at this party of yours?"

"Howell? I rather think there was. A smartish chap, would he be? In grey and black striped trousers and a black coat? Little moustache? Rather dull, he seemed. You know, not awfully amusing. About our age. I think that was him. His wife was there, too."

"His wife!" Felix had exclaimed. Then he shrugged. How stupid he had been, to think that a nine-year-old friendship would have been maintained. Stupid and sentimental. And yet Felix's memory was steady. However often he had fallen out of love he had always retained a kindness for the recent object of his affections. He had certainly been in love with Estelle . . .

"Miss Ferguson has seen some of your drawings in a paper," continued Jacob. "She's got them all cut out and pinned to the wall of her bedroom."

Felix was deeply impressed by this fact. He moved uncomfortably. His mind took a quick dive of interest.

"Pooh! What's the good of that!" he cried. "They'll

fade. The edges will curl. She ought to have had them framed." But he was extraordinarily delighted. He could hardly disguise his elation.

v

Downstairs again, Jacob partook of a light supper, and after a carefully regulated talk with Ma and Aunt Julie, in which politics or loyalty or patriotism were not mentioned at all, he went home. He lived quite near, and the night was fine. There were not even any clouds in the black sky to recall the previous evening's downpour. Felix accompanied his friend to the gate, and saw him disappear into the distance. It was a very cold night, with a frost in prospect. A chilling breeze was rising; its first efforts caught his cheek, and Felix was glad to be once again within doors. Before going back into the living-room, he ran upstairs to the studio, in order to examine the rough study he had made for the figure of the old man of the tramcar. He did not know that this picture which had arisen in his eye was to be his first escape from the ordinary black-and-white work of his evenings and weekends. He was already tired of drawing for penny weeklies the ordinary comic pictures and headings and representations of galloping horses and men in deadly combat which they required as decorative details for their commonplace budgets. These were bread-and-butter, and Felix was glad enough to be accepted by these papers as a contributor; but they were out of accord with his true ambition. The picture of "The Upper Deck," as it was called, was a different matter. It agitated him. It might be still pictorial, and therefore not in the highest flight of creative effort; but it was nevertheless the fruit of a genuinely artistic impulse, and as such it had for Felix its prime importance.

Within a few minutes he was downstairs again, to find Aunt Julie drinking a glass of stout with avid lips. She had some of the froth still upon her upper lip, and looked amazing. At Felix's entry she put down the glass, and wiped her lips, but not before he had been startled and amused at her grotesque appearance. So small, so demurely sedate, so dignified, and so funny with froth upon her lip.

"What an extraordinary young man!" she exclaimed. "Most extraordinary. I can't understand his being a friend of yours, Felix. There's nothing in common between you."

"Only our politics, Aunt Julie," answered Felix, mischievously.

Aunt Julie gave a sound that resembled a snort.

"The world would be a pretty place if it were run by theorists and firebrands," she made answer. "A pretty place." She thought for a moment, and then emptied her glass. "Yes, a most extraordinary young man," she reflected.

"He's a splendid chap," interposed Ma.

Aunt Julie looked at Ma, and then at Felix. Unconsciously her hand was once more extended to grasp the tumbler so lately drained.

"Well!" she exclaimed. And then no more. A mysterious blankness came into her expression. For the remaining few moments that she spent downstairs in their company she was embarrassingly polite. And at last she left them, going to her bed in dignity and sweet patience. The two guilty ones moved together when they were alone, and Felix rested a comradely arm upon Ma's shoulder. Together, ignoring the arch invitations of Squiffins, who offered his chest for tickling purposes, they looked down at the fading coals which remained dully glowing in the grate.

"I don't think *we* should be invited to meet the Judge," giggled Ma.

vi

Felix went to bed. He was very quiet, and very thoughtful. And when he had switched off the light he stood upright by the foot of his bed, with his hands clasped under his chin, as if some important matter were preoccupying him. He might almost, by a casual observer, have been supposed to be in the act of prayer. Only when the wind seemed to rise from between the cracks of the flooring, which made him shiver, did Felix come abruptly to himself again. Chuckling, he flung himself into bed, making the old-fashioned strips of metal which supported his mattress rattle as if in extremity. Within five minutes he was asleep, according to custom. But curiously enough, the subject of his thoughts for those several moments of abstraction had been a nine-years-old memory.

CHAPTER XIII: THE PORTRAIT

i

RUNNING quickly up the stone stairs which led to the gallery of the theatre, Felix and Jacob could hear their steps echoing as though a multitude followed them. In their hands they held leaden checks; and, when these had been given up to a commissionaire who stood by the ultimate door, and the two were inside the auditorium, they heard the checks flung with a loud chinking into a bag. The gallery was only half-full, for this was an opera which at that period had something less than the vogue which it now enjoys; and Felix and Jacob, arriving a few minutes before the beginning of the overture, stood in doubt as to where they should sit. The gallery was a very large one; it was both wide and steep. Far below, dwarfed, was the stage. Early members of the orchestra were in their places, tuning their instruments; while others were crowding up through minute doors under the stage. They were like insects under a microscope. Felix had a vision of himself as God, looking down upon a world of deplorable groundlings. Small ridiculous creatures, reared upon skinny legs and waving their arms foolishly to and fro. How ludicrous! They were at this distance as unimpressive as flies raising and rubbing their fore-legs together. But so busy, Felix thought; so busy and self-engrossed. Coughing, and carrying themselves with an air of importance, much concerned with their impressiveness in the eyes of their fellow insects. Vain, complacent, sensitive, feebly self-ashamed and anxious.

Was Felix not exactly as they? He believed so. Compassion possessed him. To what end was all this waving and striving and wriggling self-concern? It would pass. All these little flies would presently cease to exist, and it would be as though they had never lived. Other flies would take their place, and gesticulate with the same air of preoccupation and constraint. Poor helpless things, driven to make much of themselves because they had no faith, no dream, no transfiguring love. God smiled suddenly upon the orchestra, symbols of man's pathetic ineptitude; and then God became Felix once more and looked about him with healthy zest.

"What about over there?" asked Felix, pointing to the farther side of the gallery, where at the end of several empty rows it seemed to him that they might spend the evening at ease. There came a grunt of assent from Jacob, and they moved together.

"Hullo, Harcourt," said a voice, quite near, from the last row of seats.

Felix's act of contemplation, although so philosophic, could have lasted a moment only; for the man who had spoken was at the end of the row nearest the entrance, and he had just seen the newcomers. He was a pale, fair young man, with an uncouth mass of much-admired tow-coloured hair upon his head. He was looking at them with his mouth open, his legs apart, his hands resting upon the knob of a solid walking-stick. Everything about him suggested callowness, cigarettes, and a mind filled with the league tables and reports of professional football matches. Felix felt a slight aversion.

"Hello," answered Jacob; and was passing on.

"Mr. Harcourt. How d'you do," cried another voice, which held ever so slight an urgency.

What a modest, shy voice it was. Felix pricked up his ears, and turned. How impossible merely to greet and

pass the owner of such a voice. Jacob looked down into the theatre, glittering through its inevitable thickness of dust; then aside at the inscrutable—the, to Jacob at this moment, punchable—face of Felix; and finally back to the owner of the voice. He performed these evolutions so rapidly that it was as though he had blinked.

“How are you?” he sheepishly asked.

“Won’t you come in here?” said the voice. “There’s plenty of room.”

Jacob hesitated again. He seemed paralysed. He deferred to Felix.

“Is there really?” he asked, doubtfully. They were in the back row, which had an advantage over all other rows of the gallery in that it offered something to lean against. And in the smallest possible time Jacob and Felix were sitting with the pale young man and the owner of the voice.

“How d’you do, Mr. Hunter,” said Estelle. “Do you remember me?”

Felix felt little light fingers within his clasp. He looked into the same innocent blue eyes as those of ten years earlier. Her frock was of a grey with such blue and yellow in its delicate colouring that he immediately thought of the flower called columbine. He had done the same at their first meeting, when he was a little boy and when she was a little girl. Estelle was like a flower: she was unchanged; she was still as fragile and as charming as he remembered her. There was a softness, an appealing youth and tender grace in Estelle’s manner, which he had never found so marked in anybody else. It drew his sympathy, his interest, as no other quality could have done.

Felix sat between Estelle and Jacob as one who dreamed. He was no longer God-like and contemplative.

His heart was light; his tongue stumbled; he grinned and was loquacious.

ii

It was the most entrancing performance that has ever been given of "The Pirates of Penzance." The singing was good, the orchestra was good, the libretto was witty, the music even wittier. And Felix found his company beyond praise. Old Jacob he knew. Jacob, if sometimes an Ancient Mariner, was of the finest quality in friends. Albert Ferguson was the nonentity he appeared, and yawned at the end of the row in such a way as to be invisible to Felix and a negligible member of the party. But Estelle was something altogether fresh. She was very fair, and there was a transparency in her skin which made her really delicious. Her brows were darker than her hair, and her hair was golden. To see her in that huge gallery, among the bare wooden seats and the clots of other girls in blouses and hats, who had moist faces and glossy eyes, was to be ravished with delight. She was to the end cool and fresh. Her colouring was so delicate that she seemed pale in that devastating light; but her lips were well-formed and her eyes and teeth were alike clear and beautiful.

"If a pearl could have such life and movement," thought Felix, seeking enthusiastic comparisons, "it might approach her! But no pearl has life and movement." That was a profound thought. The pearl has indeed no life and movement. He was forced back to the columbine. Here indeed were life and movement, and some approach to her colouring. But a columbine has no eyes of such speaking purity as Estelle's. A columbine is a flower, and a flower is at heart a weed. Not so Estelle. She baffled comparison. Felix waived all attempt to liken her to anything but herself. Eyes and speaking lips were his

intoxication during the whole of the interval between the two acts of the opera. The interval was ten minutes of immaculate happiness. She leant forward, so that Jacob also might be included in the conversation, and Felix, sitting back, saw her throat and the outline of her rounded chin. It did not matter to him what she said; it was her fragile beauty that exhilarated him to a point beyond any delight he had experienced for years. But he wanted to see her in sunshine, to see the delicacies of her complexion, the curling of the wavy hair, and in repose the moulding which vivacity and the coarse lighting of the theatre threw into relief. After all, purity of colour and line is the least questionable of all æsthetic beauties; and Estelle had this purity. She seemed flawless. She was like a fairy princess in that gallery of humans.

iii

When the opera was over, and they all surged out at the doors, Felix was close to Estelle. He tried, in fact, to protect her from the scramble of laughing, thoughtless girls and men. Estelle was so slight, and to his eye had so much of the exquisite softness of the drowsy kitten, that he feared for her safety. He need not have done so. She slipped through the crowd and was not crushed, but turned her face to him radiant with pleasure.

"Here I am!" she said, like a child. And then, when they were at last in the street, in the hustle and darkness, with big street lamps making the shadows blue and mysterious, and brilliant tramcars swaying up unwieldily, like steamers plying between ports, the four crowded together for leave-taking. In that light Estelle's face was like porcelain, so rare, so delicate. . . . She turned to Felix. "Will you come and see us?" she asked, so entirely for him that there was no sense of incongruity between his

vision and the ordinary words. "Do. I should like it so much."

Felix almost said to her: the last time I came to see you I came away rather less pleased than I wanted to be; but he restrained his tongue. The gentleness which he had learned from Ma made him chary always of wounding the defenceless. Instead, he smiled down at her.

"Of course," he said, jovially. "I shall be charmed."

"But *really* come." Felix was flattered by her fear that his phrase was a mere courtesy. He was amused at it. He wanted to see her; he wanted to see her soon and in daylight. And this was winter, and full of darkness and sullen tones. Daylight, sunshine . . . against black, alone, against brilliant colours. . . . He promised again. Her hand was within his; they were together in the crowd, cut off at this moment from the others, very much upon equal terms. Estelle's face was so close that Felix was dazzled. In that single evening, with the voluntarily created legend that they were old comrades, who had met again by happy fortune, the two had seemed to become intimate friends. They parted, certainly, as friends. And as Estelle went with her brother along Seven Sisters Road towards their home, Felix and Jacob turned to walk in the direction of Highgate.

They were silent for a moment or two, Felix with a vision before his eyes, and Jacob thoughtful. Felix had all his life had such love of beautiful things, and such vehement hatred of ugly ones, that he was moved by beauty to real intensity of feeling. From ugliness, from deformity, from cruelty, he had always sensitively turned, so that a cripple, or a person with red rims to his eyes or with warts or decayed teeth, was a source of torture to the little boy. And as he grew older, and learned pity for the afflicted, and found that physical deformity was less repulsive than deformity of the soul, Felix had be-

gun to set such store by beauty, both of form and spirit, that for him it was the single reality. The laughter of children, though it might be the outcome of naughtiness, the unobtrusive performance of detestable tasks (a form of beauty for which Felix had no personal aptitude), a beauty of movement or feature or courtesy, were alike to him. In the perception of them lay the warmth of his own happiness. And in Estelle it seemed to Felix that he could observe beauty of every kind. He believed that such delicate grace of expression and carriage must be the semblance of a spirit as full of grace. Beauty, beauty. . . . His heart was drowning. . . .

Presently Jacob gave a grunt. It was a gruff noise, which showed that he had been thinking deeply.

"Hn," he said. But he did not make his meaning clear.

Felix, aroused from his blind reverie, became immediately normal.

"Funny we should have run into the Fergusons," he declared, lightly.

"Hn," said Jacob, his shoulders hunched as he plodded alongside with less impulsive steps. Felix eyed him, perplexed at such moroseness at the end of a sparkling encounter.

"What is the matter with you?" he demanded. "Old grunter. I suppose it's the old porker coming out."

"Well," answered Jacob, in his serious way, "I was just thinking."

"Oh. Pity you can't think of something agreeable." Felix was fretful.

"I do sometimes," patiently answered the grunting Jacob. Then, after a pause: "And sometimes not."

He did not tell Felix what he had been thinking, because upon this occasion it was unpleasant. He had been remembering certain questions addressed to him at the office a few days previously by Albert Ferguson. They

came back to him now with added clearness. They were as phosphorus in the darkness. On the whole Jacob did not find the presence of the Fergusons that evening at all funny. He thought it entirely explicable. A deep frown passed across his face. He looked sideways at the unconscious Felix. Felix was smiling. He was looking straight before him, and his head was thrown back as if with eagerness.

"Hn," grunted Jacob, a third time.

iv

The Fergusons lived in a turning out of Seven Sisters Road—in one of a long series of stucco houses. It was not far from the Nag's Head, and very near to that Flemington Road in which the Hunters had spent some miserable years. The Fergusons were six in number, Mr. and Mrs. Ferguson having four children, of whom Estelle, the youngest, was the only girl. She lived at home, helped her mother (they kept two servants), and experimented in art and music. That is to say, she drew and painted in water-colours, and sang in a small, clear voice to her own accompaniment. She read books on art and went to chamber-concerts. Mr. Ferguson, the father, was often from home upon business, and was something to do with the hardware trade. The eldest boy, Pelham, was in his father's firm; the second, Roland, was with a shipping company; and Albert, who was only a year older than the charming Estelle, was, as I have said, in the same office in Cannon Street as Jacob Harcourt. Pelham was thirty, and unmarried. He was dark, and had a chestnut moustache above plump lips. He was a dandy, with a soft, luscious voice and a slight suggestion of scent. His lashes were very long, and although his nose was merely plump and shapeless, he was considered handsome. There

was no mistaking the effect he had upon the young women he met in Holloway society, for his soft eyes and still softer voice made him irresistible. He was a very finished product indeed. Felix felt distaste for him.

Felix also felt distaste for Albert, because Albert, lacking as yet his brother's polish and his brother's good looks, was imitative. He was like a sixpenny copy of a half-guinea article. The real thing, Felix surmised, as seen in the West End, would be priced at a couple of guineas, which would be more than it was worth. Pelham represented the half-guinea, or local, article. Albert had yellow fingers, as the result of smoking cheap cigarettes during the whole of his leisure time. His tongue was a yellowish-white. His tow-coloured hair, worn long, was in harmony with his pale face. But he was not a weakling. Without appearing to take any exercise but that of cycling, he maintained his strength. He sang in a husky voice of great power, drank a fair amount, and wore rings. His opinions, which were expressed with vigour, and even heat, were obtained from the headlines and shorter paragraphs of "The Daily Mail."

The only brother for whom Felix at all cared was Roland; and that was because Roland was the bad boy of the family. Roland had eyebrows which met above his nose and gave him a slightly Mephistophelian aspect. He was a restless, able fellow, with brains and a debauched character. He was fair, but the brows were dark. At the age of one-and-twenty he had seduced a servant-girl, had married her, in spite of a good deal of hysteria in all concerned, and within six months of the marriage had lost his wife in child-bed. From that time, under a faint cloud, he had continued to live with the others in Cornwallis Road; but he was suspected of evil conduct, and really nice girls were only asked to the house when he was out of the way. This drove him to girls who were not so

nice or to men who were his inferiors; and the contacts made him restless and unsatisfied with life. They increased his already considerable egotism. As is often the case, this black sheep was really the most virtuous of the brothers, as Felix, knowing nothing at all about them, immediately divined. And Felix, who did not think about virtue or vice as they were shown in specific actions, found Roland the most likable of the family. Roland at least had not that air of scented foulness which Felix disliked in Pelham; he was not a shoddy and callow imitation of a man about town, as Albert was. He was rather humorous, dressed slackly, was clean-shaven, short, and compactly built. He was the sort of man who got on well in railway carriages with racing touts, railwaymen, commercial travellers, and the men who notice what crops are doing well or ill as the train passes through areas of cultivated land.

Mrs. Ferguson seemed to Felix to be only three-quarters sane. Her life had been, possibly, a difficult one, for Mr. Ferguson had a grim, hard manner, and, being tall, upright, and iron-grey, gave the impression that he was a retired soldier. He was very much the master in his own home, and even Pelham was afraid of him. His wife was often without energy and without spirit. She suffered from headaches and constantly looked as though, if one were to be thoughtlessly harsh in speech or sudden in action, she would burst into weak sobbing. Nevertheless, as far as Felix saw during his early visits to Cornwallis Road, she was a fond and affectionate mother. It was clear that Pelham was her favourite child; she followed him proudly with her eyes all the time he was in the room. For Albert, also, she showed partiality. Only towards Roland was Mrs. Ferguson's manner strained, but that was because she was frightened of him and frightened of the disorder and loud shoutings of virtue and instruc-

tion which she feared he might one day bring for a second time into the house.

Estelle was her father's favourite. She was spoiled by him. Lavish pocket-money, and the gratification of every whim, followed upon Mr. Ferguson's affection. Felix from the first looked upon Mr. Ferguson with some fear. Estelle was peculiarly his child, his pet. She could persuade him into taking her to concerts which bored him, to picture galleries which bored him still more. Nobody else could have done that. But it was because he loved Estelle more than anything else in the world. And yet, with all the affection which the elder Fergusons felt and quite clearly showed for one or other of their offspring, this was not a happy family. It was a disjointed and anarchistic family. Felix came upon it with interest: it was a great education for him. If he had not seen such a family in being he would never have been able to imagine what it would be like. As he took pains to point out to Jacob, the Fergusons had importance for the sociologist. They defied some of his laws.

Jacob was thoughtful when Felix revealed this truth to him. He was not, however, altogether unused to difficulty in relating families or individuals to his social conceptions.

V

The Fergusons' house was furnished in the old, heavy manner which had been considered proper in the period during which the Ferguson family had arisen. The furniture was worn, but it was solid. It was the sort of furniture that went with warmth and big meals and big fires. Mrs. Ferguson sat upon one side of the fireplace in an easy chair without arms, such as at one time women were said to prefer. She was engaged perpetually in doing something which Felix supposed to be wool-work, but

which he found later to be darning. She never did anything but darn while he was in the room. She never read; and if Estelle showed her a drawing or a new dress or undergarment or played or sang a new song or piece of music, Mrs. Ferguson always acknowledged the compliment by saying "very pretty, dear," without ceasing to darn. She had a large grey face, with untidy light hair that was growing green instead of white. Discoloured patches, due to insomnia, were under her eyes. And as she darned she gave twitches which occasionally were so violent that she ran the needle into the forefinger of her left hand. Felix could not but be depressed when he looked at her. From whom, then, did Estelle inherit her beauty?

Estelle was not vivacious. She was extremely quiet, and at home Felix found her very gentle. Her eye was clear, but it never kindled. Her step was sedate; when she sat down it was with incomparable grace. She was in every way beautiful to the eye, whether she stood, or sat, or walked. When Felix first went to the house, and was shown into the warm yellow-brown drawing room, she was at home alone with her mother. The room was empty at his entrance; and he had an instant to absorb an impression of brass fender and marble mantelpiece, heavily ornamented gas-chandelier, and thick carpets and rugs, with rich draught-excluding curtains—everything brown and brown and brown, as if it had all been baked by the immense glowing fire in the hearth. A huge alabaster clock ticked solemnly upon the mantelpiece, and struck the half hour in a sepulchral tone. The room was like the drawing-room of a suburban doctor, into which patients are shown and in which they trepidantly wait. And when Estelle joined him she was so incongruous with the scene that she resembled a butterfly in a wintry forest. His breath was quite taken away. Felix—Felix

the ever ready—had no word of greeting in that first instant. But he was filled with wondering admiration.

The feeling was so different from what he had expected. They had been near to each other at the theatre—friends and full of intimacy and unconstraint. Here they were strangers again. Estelle, who had come into the room with an aspect of demure pleasure, had lost her confidence also. She gave him a hurried hand, and was conventional. She even sat forward in her chair, while Felix, leaning back in his, with his hands characteristically clasped in front of him, spoke rapidly in nervousness.

"Old Jacob's gone to a football match," he said. "Not to see the game; but to find out just what it is that makes men go week after week to see paid professionals kick a ball about for ninety minutes. It's a part of his investigation of life. He's going to write a book, 'Modern Miasmas'—and they're all intellectual miasmas—they're all in Jacob's head. He's got the job of accounting for the fact that the world isn't what he thought it was. That's because he made his mind up first, without seeing anything. Jacob's what is called an idealist: truth isn't good enough for him. He can't leave anything alone. He's a moral fidget."

"And are you a Conservative?" Estelle was beginning to smile. She was already at ease. But she wished to indicate that it was in Felix she took an interest, not at all in his friend.

"According to Jacob," answered Felix, promptly, quick to notice the favourable symptoms. "But it's not true. I'm simply a realist. I'm not a politician at all."

"And you don't want to change anything?"

"Not institutions. Not patch the old fabric. Change the spirit—the heart," cried Felix, with a kind of glee.

"Only there's no changing Jacob. He's the old porker through and through."

"He'll be here soon," remarked Estelle. "At least, I hope so. He's gone to the football match with Albert."

Felix's heart gave the smallest jump. Jacob . . . Jacob was a deep one. Across Felix's mind ran an uncomfortable memory. He was thinking of Jack Howell, and of what had happened ten years before. For one instant his expression had something in it of the faintest caution.

"Old Jacob?" he asked. "Splendid." And then, more thoughtfully: "He didn't say he was coming." To himself, unspoken, 'artful old devil. As artful as I am.'

vi

If the truth must be told, the meeting was as great a surprise to Jacob as it was to Felix. Jacob arrived at teatime in Albert's company, rather fearful of a tea with the Fergusons, whom he did not like. When, therefore, he found Felix was to be of the party his relief was so evident that it was laughable. He came sturdily into the room, stared, and brightened.

"Well, you old wicked one!" cried Felix, in the highest spirits. "You've squandered your afternoon, then. And I hope you saw the red shirts lose."

Jacob solemnly regarded his friend. He turned to Estelle's mother, who had just come into the room. Her moon face and despairing limpness of carriage were such as to demand either tears or folly from others.

"I must apologise for Felix, Mrs. Ferguson," he said, deliberately. "He's a little irresponsible."

"Sometimes," wailed Mrs. Ferguson, still preoccupied with her own melancholy thoughts, "I wonder who is responsible for everything. I don't feel it *can* be God; be-

cause He'd have so much to answer for at the Resurrection."

"That's very anthropomorphic, Mrs. Ferguson," objected Felix, as he shook hands.

"Is it?" asked Mrs. Ferguson, looking pleased.

"Felix means," persisted Jacob, "that as long as he's happy he doesn't mind what happens."

"What I meant *really* was, did you enjoy your game?"

"Game!" Jacob was scornful. "Exploitation. It's not a game. It's a commodity. Like all professionalism, it's nothing but the weekly exploitation of a lot of mugs. It's the exploitation of the herd instinct."

"Lot o' bad temper this arfnoon," interpolated Albert, with authority. "Ref. didn't know the rules. One section of the crowd very unsportsmanlike. Not our people—strangers."

"I got several hacks on the legs," said Jacob. "I know that much."

"Oh, I didn't mean that. . . ." Albert was puzzled. "They weren't *rough*," he said.

"That was enthusiasm," explained Felix. "I expect you were kicking yourself."

Jacob was so disgusted that Estelle laughed.

"I believe you liked the team that lost, Mr. Harcourt," she suddenly rallied.

Felix was lost in admiration. He looked at Estelle with respect. She was more than beautiful. She was profound. Before Jacob could repel the charge, Felix nipped in with a supplement.

"That was because they had fewest friends present," he explained. "The sentimental conservative in Jacob!"

Jacob surveyed the two of them, with pity for their grinning foolishness. He took his breath to answer; thought better of it; and took a long drink of tea.

"Oh, it was a *draw*," Albert said; and when everybody

laughed at that he rocked his head a little, thinking that he had been witty.

vii

Still Felix had not seen Estelle in daylight. He wanted the sun to catch her eyes and stir the gold of her hair. It was winter, and he had seen her only in the theatre and by the gaslight of this huge old-fashioned house. He longed for the spring, when she might disport herself out of doors and in glorious weather that would do justice to her beauty. She was meant for the spring and the summer; for the open air and the glories of the day. Such beauty demanded its fine setting. He exulted in this same beauty, following every gesture of Estelle's with an unconscious directness of glance. It seemed to Felix to be inexhaustible in the power to reveal itself in every care-free movement. Estelle's hair was parted today at the side, and as her throat was exposed (although, of course, this was not yet the era of the really low-necked frock) she was to be appreciated as an adorable child. Whenever he contemplated her, Felix learned new gestures and new charms of pose. If he had felt them studied, the charm would have gone at once; but they were clearly the movements of youth and health, and as such were delicious. He could hardly restrain his admiration until tea was finished; but when it was possible to speak without being overheard, he approached her. Albert and Jacob were standing by the fire, smoking, and talking of office matters. Mrs. Ferguson had followed the maid from the room. Estelle and Felix, exquisitely alone, were close to one another. Felix had such consciousness of her that he could imagine her softness; and he almost reddened with embarrassment as he plunged suddenly into the tremendous request which had for so long trembled upon his lips.

"Look here," he said. "I wish you'd let me draw you."

"Why, of course!" cried Estelle, her blue eyes raised. "I hoped you would!"

Felix was overwhelmed. How simple he had been, to indulge in such trepidation!

"It's awfully kind," he stammered, as if insisting that her quick readiness was a considered courtesy. "I'd like to *paint* you; but I'm so afraid my skill in that line's too small as yet."

"Practise on me!" she suggested. "I'd love it. Don't you see that it's delightful to be painted—to have anybody think you're *worth* painting?"

Felix looked candidly at her. A faint smile crossed his face, and died again.

"I don't look at it in that way," he said. "I know my own limitations too well."

"Limitations—rubbish!" For all her outspokenness, Estelle did not raise her voice. What she said was for his ear alone. They were still apart from the others, and not overheard by them. Her tact was quite excellent. Felix rejoiced at it.

"Well, when?" he asked.

"Not when——" Estelle paused. "I'd rather not *here*," she said.

Felix reflected upon her meaning. "Not when the others are here," he supposed. In this house it would be impossible to keep a room for such occupation as painting.

"You could come to Highgate, of course," he ventured.

Estelle gave a decisive nod. Felix liked the way she made up her mind.

"That's best. When should I come?"

"It's so dark. I want daylight. It must be daylight." Felix was thinking aloud.

They were interrupted by the return of Mrs. Ferguson.

viii

The first sitting took place upon the following Sunday. Ma and Aunt Julie had been duly apprised of the fact; and Elsie had sniffed upon hearing it. Nevertheless, she was full of interest, and watched the putting up of an easel in the living-room with moving hands which showed the instinctive wish to help. The little house was brilliantly clean, and Ma and Aunt Julie had dressed early. This was in compliment to the visitor, who was to arrive at ten o'clock, to lunch at the house, and to drink tea with the Hunters. She was then to return home in time to keep her mother and father company for the evening. It was a most exciting morning. Felix was up for the belated dawn, and had made all his preparations by the time breakfast was served. He had thought it would be best that the sittings should take place in the studio; but Aunt Julie, upon learning this, had protested so strongly, and with such assurance of peculiar knowledge of the laws of propriety, that the unsophisticated Hunters had been terrorised. The easel had been brought downstairs, where it looked stupid and out of place.

"No nice girl—no *really* nice girl would be comfortable alone in a studio," Aunt Julie asserted. "She'd be constrained the whole time. I *know*."

"What prurient minds really nice girls must have," remarked Felix, nettled.

"No, Felix," answered Aunt Julie, with great dignity, shrinking nevertheless at the word which Felix had used. "It's not *they*, but the world, who . . . which . . ." Aunt Julie coughed. "The censorious world—not ourselves, but something outside us altogether . . ."

Aunt Julie went on dusting the room, because Felix, rather abstracted, had lost interest in her argument. She carried herself with such dignity that she seemed to be

acting a dignified part. A feeling of moral superiority to the others was expressed, conscious, but as consciously leavened and ennobled by kindness and a sense of relationship. Felix had consented to the use of the living-room, into which, as Aunt Julie had said, "Ma and I can pop every now and then—quite unostentatiously," because he had no means of knowing how emancipated from fear of her neighbours Estelle really was. He himself cared nothing for neighbours; but he had nothing to lose by their interest in him. Equally, he cared nothing at all for Aunt Julie's arguments. In fact, they ruffled him as the statement of any imbecile falsehood would have done. They seemed silly and Pharisaical. Aunt Julie ruffled him often nowadays—not seriously but perceptibly. He was ceasing to look at her with pleasure and amusement. Sometimes he even went so far as to slacken speed as he walked home at nights, because he knew that a bright, brave, dignified little woman was awaiting him at home. Not until this morning had he given Ma any indication of his feeling; but when Aunt Julie had gone upstairs to dust the bedrooms and when Ma came into the room, to view it, as converted into a studio, for the first time, he beckoned. In her ear, in a whisper, he said:

"How long's Aunt Julie staying with us, Ma?"

He was staggered once more, as he had often been, by Ma's reply. She awed him. There was no bottom to her depth. She looked quickly over her shoulder, came closer, and in her turn whispered:

"I don't know, boy! I've been *trying hard to find out!*"

"Good God!" cried Felix, quite out loud. He and Ma remained staring at each other, consternation upon their faces. Both simultaneously relapsed into horrified giggling.

ix

The day was fine. A strong winter sun made hard shadows everywhere. Out of doors a chilling, bristling wind carried eddies of dust and a few old husky leaves in at the gates and round the corners; but the air was clear and invigorating. Flushed and sparkling as the result of her smart walk, and bewitchingly hooded against the cold, Estelle at length presented herself. Felix came galloping down the stairs as Elsie opened the front door; and Ma was quickly present. There were no ceremonies in this house, and the discreet huddlings of truly well-bred people while a visitor is abandoned to a servant did not occur. The Hunters made no pretence that they could not hear their own door-knocker. And the preparations for the sitting were quickly made.

"Is this where you always work?" asked Estelle, who was seated in an easy pose.

"No. But Aunt Julie thought you might object to being in my studio."

There was malice in Felix's heart; but his tone was unexceptionable.

"How silly! Of course I shouldn't," cried Estelle. She laughed. "How antediluvian! But who's Aunt Julie?"

"Hush!" Felix put a finger to his lips. As if dramatically, the door at this moment was stealthily opened, with an excess of care, and Aunt Julie showed her head round its edge as though she were most delicately fulfilling an unpleasant mission. Her white hair and pale, gaping, extraordinarily expressionless eyes made her a grotesque and wraith-like apparition. At the sight of Estelle she started rather effectively, and made as if to depart again.

"Oh, Felix . . ." she said, in her most dignified deep voice. "I didn't know you were . . ."

"Liar!" whispered Felix to himself. "This is Miss Ferguson, Aunt Julia . . . Mrs. Webley . . ."

"How d'you do?" The ladies bowed.

"I just wanted my . . . Ah, there it is!" Aunt Julia took three swift and lithe steps in the direction of the sideboard and picked up her spectacle case, which lay there. She withdrew, under an inquisitive glance from Estelle which held neither amusement nor complaisance.

"Is she your real aunt? Or d'you just call her . . ."

"Oh, real." Although he tried hard, Felix could not wholly delete from his voice a suggestion of regret that the relationship should be legitimate. He was in a short and very secret rage. He could have thrown the easel at Aunt Julie. Damn her! Damn her! He fumed to himself. For a few moments he really could not appreciate the entrancing beauty of the figure before him.

And how beautiful it was! The heavy silk dress which Estelle was wearing fell in stiff folds from the waist. Her delicate hands stood out clear from the background of its curious dull redness. And although the dress was full also at the breast it did nothing to disguise the grace of the model. Her hair was more elaborately arranged than it had been at their last meeting, and met the sun with the sun's own pallid gold. She was a picture of delight. And in contemplation of this picture, and his own busy, speedy work towards its transference to his own study, Felix lost his recent anger. It was forgotten. Only a reappearance of Aunt Julie could have revived it.

For some time he worked swiftly, with an unusual haste. Then self-criticism and self-control came upon him. At this rate the picture was doomed. He might paint something, but it would not be the beauty he saw. It would be a crude and useless portrait, whereas what

grew in Felix's heart was a precious reality not so easily to be put upon paper or canvas. How impossible ever to *express*! To see—that was easy. To draw, to reveal, to convey—he would always fail. He didn't know enough. He knew nothing. He was an incompetent fool. . . . Wave after wave of misery swept upon him. Felix was in the grip of the artist's despair.

"I shall make a mess of this," he said abruptly. "I'm sorry."

Estelle made no reply. If she felt any emotion at his tone, so charged with self-contempt, she gave no sign of it. Only when Felix, with a muttered sound, shook his head, and began grimly to cast aside the work which had been done, she checked him.

"Go on with it!" cried Estelle. "If it's a failure, never mind. Go on with it."

"Go on with a failure?" It was against Felix's custom. He was rebellious at the mere notion. He stared at her, his eyes dark, and his expression that of one overwhelmed in defeat. They faced one another—he broad and wrathful and appealing; she, no less appealing, small and exquisitely fair and sweet in appearance. It was as though they struggled.

"Go on because I want you to," she begged. There was a long silence. Then Felix resumed his work, quietly, his colour heightened and his lips parted in a slight smile which made his face unreadable.

x

It seemed no time before the door opened again—this time without the diplomatic furtiveness which Aunt Julie had shown. Ma boldly plunged into the room, with, however, a genuinely concerned expression upon her face.

"I'm sorry, old chap," she said. "But I'm afraid

the dinner will spoil if it isn't brought in now. It's such a pity. Could you stop?"

Felix, quite restored to his normal buoyancy of spirit, nodded cheerfully.

"I expect Estelle will be thankful to rest," he said.

"I'm rather stiff . . ." Estelle attempted to rise; but so stiff was she that she tottered. Felix jumped forward immediately to save her from falling; and for the first time in his life supported, in the full tide of joy, that ravishingly slim and yielding person. She was like a little bird, so soft in the circle of his arm. He was shot through and through with a divine happiness.

It was over in a minute, and Estelle, perfectly composed, had advanced to the fire, while Felix withdrew his easel and covered the study he had made. Aunt Julie glanced straight at the easel, as if with suspicion, as she came into the room, and Felix saw in that moment of parade how small and erect and almost aggressively well-bred she was. She seemed to draw attention to her breeding. Her dress was of grey silk, perfectly fitting, but cut rather long; and she was pathetic in her smallness and her lost beauty and her avidity for attention and respect. She was heavily laden with several things at once. Bread, a jug of water, knives and forks, and mats upon which to stand the hot plates.

"Could you take this from me, please, Felix?" she said, in a firm, deep, measured voice, so almost oracular in manner that she seemed like one who announced a calamity.

"You're carrying too many things, Aunt Julie," cried Felix, rallying, hastening to relieve her. The bread and water-jug were thus rescued from disaster. Turning, Felix was in time to catch Estelle's wondering glance at Aunt Julie, and to realise that Estelle might think this a curious household.

"I'm trying to save Ma," replied Aunt Julie, with even greater dignity and more clearly articulated politeness than before. Her tone was a severe reproach to levity. She gravely explained. "You see, Elsie has gone home. She goes at one o'clock on Sundays. . . ." Aunt Julie's thoughtfulness for others shone with a piercing light. She was an embodied rebuke to the slothful and the young, of whatever class.

Aunt Julie was gone again. The two who had been made to feel their thoughtless triviality continued to stand—in some discomfort—by the fire. For a moment they did not speak, did not look at each other, but when at last their eyes flew together, and almost their hands, there was such interchange of common emotion in the glance and impulse that they had no need of speech. All the same, Estelle, looking quickly over her shoulder in order to be sure that she should not be overheard, said in a breathless tone :

"Next time I come, could we be . . . in your studio? I'd rather . . ."

CHAPTER XIV: AUNT JULIE

i

FELIX was now in a state of almost feverish artistic activity. He slept deeply, dreaming vehemently each night of Estelle, and so stimulated by increasing love for her as to be, in his most secret and unconscious thoughts, obsessed. But in the daytime, when immediate duties had first call upon his attention, Felix's energy was greater than it had ever been. At the office he dealt quickly with all that was presented to him. At times, it is true, he was abstracted, and fell into a musing state from which he was not easily roused; but for the most part he was alert, good-tempered, and indefatigable. In the evenings, apart from the regular black-and-white work by which he augmented his income, he gave himself to the study in sepia which he called "The Upper Deck." It grew rapidly; it was already recognisable as a picture.

Jacob, who had served as model for a number of the human details, was stirred by "The Upper Deck" as he had never previously been stirred by any drawing which Felix had made. He came along to the cottage on many evenings which he would otherwise have given to his own peculiar studies. And whenever he came, avoiding as if with distaste the easel and those sketches of Estelle which Felix kept apart from the others, he remarked with delight how this picture had progressed from the first charcoal studies, so free and imperfect, to the grouped and impressive whole which was growing under Felix's hand and enthusiasm.

"You know," said Jacob, deeply thoughtful in face of the drawing. "I didn't know you had this in you, Felix. It's . . . real." He spoke laboriously, seriously, picking his words with the painful defiance of the conscious amateur.

"My dear old chap," answered Felix. "Don't you make any such mistake. It isn't real. It's not good. It's only *recognisable*. That's where you go wrong. You think that if a thing is *recognisable* it's *real*. No greater mistake. He drew himself up, smiling almost mockingly; because the picture in being was so flimsy, copyist, and spiritless a transcript of the reality of his emotion.

"Well," answered Jacob. "You may be right. I may like it because I can see what it's meant for. But I don't see why you should despise your own work."

"Because I don't *see* it as my own work, porker. I see it as a lamentable experiment. The composition's not bad, and some of the detail's all right. What's wrong is at the root of the business. It's as good as I can make it; but it's an illustration. It's *recognisable*. Now what I want some day to get at is reality."

"You can't do it," Jacob assured him. "We're all out for that—in our various ways—artist, writer, scientist . . . Some key, we're after. Don't you see that's what gives the whole business its interest? Why, Felix, I should have thought you'd have seen that. We're all after truth. And everything you do is like a note—a sort of approximation that's no good the moment it's set down."

"It's no good, I quite agree," answered Felix, flipantly; his attention, nevertheless, drawn to Jacob's theory—drawn as much by Jacob's sincerity as by any sense of the novelty of Jacob's view. "I suppose it *is* all experience."

"Well," repeated Jacob, who often used the word "well"

as a sort of stake by which he could support himself; "what I mean is this. I'm told I've got my facts wrong about the coral insect; but take it just as a figure. Let me show you what I mean. The coral insect works under the surface of the ocean. Gradually it builds the coral island. That's its whole job. And when it gets to the surface, to the air, d'ye see, it dies. That instant."

"What is it you're told isn't true?" asked Felix, his attention by now altogether seized.

"That it dies. It doesn't matter. Supposing it does, it's a symbol of man's expression. A man's always searching for truth. He makes a book or a picture or a musical composition; or he sets down things he's seen in the course of an investigation. It's like turning up earth, for him. That's something he's reached. The moment it's made, it's out; and whatever it may be for others, for him it's finished. See what I mean? I used to wonder why painters could bear to part with their pictures——"

"Because they hate 'em," interposed Felix.

"Because a picture is a sort of skin they've sloughed," retorted Jacob. "The same with books. Any work of the imagination. And scientific discovery's just the same. It's the result of imagination, just as the things that are *called* imaginative are. Just as this picture is."

"Golly!" said Felix, pointing at "The Upper Deck." "That a work of the imagination!"

"It is: it *has been*," persisted Jacob.

"Good old 'has been'!" cried Felix, with ribaldry.

"You say that because you're dissatisfied, Felix. It doesn't come up to what you want. And d'ye know *why* you're dissatisfied? It's because you're bigger than ye think for, Felix. It's because you're an artist. That's why."

Felix turned round and stared at Jacob.

"But I'm one of the finest artists that ever lived, you guffin!" he exclaimed.

"No, I didn't say that. And I don't say it," said Jacob, sturdily, because he knew he was being ridiculed. "But I do say that you're bigger than you think for."

"Why, you old idiot!" stormed Felix. "You don't know what an artist is. You old crackpot! I—why I'm . . . I'm an advertising quack. That's all I am. And I've taken you in with this damned trick. Why, you poor old fool, if anybody who knew a picture when he saw one were to squint at all this muck—this, and this, and this . . ." He spurned the studies and sent them flying as if a gust of wind had entered the studio—"he'd *laugh*. He'd laugh till he was *sick* with laughing."

Felix was smiling, was grinning; but he was in deadly earnest. He was really moved. At this moment he was brimming with knowledge of his own mediocrity. He was brimming and heart-broken with it. Jacob sat there unperturbed, stolidly convinced of his own rightness.

"You can shout till I'm deaf," he said. "But you won't change my opinion."

"Because you're an obstinate old pig."

"Because the more you shout the more unconvincing you are," replied Jacob. "Like everybody else. Shouting and abuse only go with a bad case—as you know. Have I called *you* 'pig'?"

"I'd like to *hear* you!" cried Felix, defiantly. "Pig doesn't eat pig, my dear Jacob." He had recovered his composure, and was collecting his spurned studies. "And if it comes to that," he continued, "a little self-dissatisfaction wouldn't do *you* any harm. Old rascal!"

But there was a gentleness in his tone. A little hope had dawned in his heart. Even if the picture was no good—and he knew it was no good because all its faults shouted at him—perhaps he might one day do something

that was tolerable. Not now; not soon; but one day—who could tell? An artist he would never be, because artists were pure disembodied spirits with souls like the slow movements of Mozart's quartettes; but he might do something decently mediocre if he worked. Ah, that he might! To himself, with dropped lids, Felix sighed. It was an unwonted mood, but a genuine one. He was serious and thoughtful. And by his loyal stoutness Jacob at any rate had shown his affection; and if that were a small thing, then the whole basis of Felix's philosophy was at fault. To the silent Jacob, sitting puffing at his pipe in the studio under the shaded electric light, while the ceiling sloped in obedience to the roof's incline, was vouchsafed a curious glimpse of Felix's softer heart—of that humility which he generally managed to conceal without difficulty.

"You're not a bad old sport really, Jacob," said Felix, in a voice of careless unconcern.

"I know that," replied Jacob. "I've known it for years."

"It's a pity you're such a fool," added Felix, recovering himself every instant. "It's having too much heart. It vitiates all you do—all you *think*. It'll ruin you. You'll grow more miasmic every day. Till you're a walking morass of sentiment. You ought to try to be more realistic—like me. It would do you good. Hard, you know."

ii

Felix was not hard—and yet he was hard. He was harder to himself than to anybody else. He had the hard, cruel perceptiveness of the child. But his judgment was not hard. He was never censorious. But he was impatient of affectation, of humbug, of sentimentality in others. That was because his own affectations, humbugs, sentimentalisms were lighter than the majority. He was

not conceited, because other things and other people interested him more than himself. Nevertheless, he was arrogant. He was also cruel in perception, because his vision was trained and because it was not obscured by moral ideas of what he ought to see. To that extent he certainly was an artist.

From the beginning, although he had accepted her with the grudging and half-hearted affection which one accords to strange relatives, Felix had known that Aunt Julie was grit in the cottage wheel. The Hunters had been through so much together that they were incapable of pretence with each other. This was the case even with Godfrey. He was the actor, and he had the actor's deportment; but when he talked at home about real things it was with complete sincerity. The Hunters were all sincere. They laughed at affectation. And into their circle had come Aunt Julie. Aunt Julie had lived all her married life in a circle where social importance was, so to speak, important. She had been a pathetic impostor among brazen impostors or mere snobs. She had therefore absorbed snobbery. But she had also been much alone; and as, when she was alone, she had nothing with which to occupy her mind, she had come very greatly to be concerned with her own personality, talents, status, demeanour, pronounciation, and affairs. All this Felix precisely realised. He knew it, and he pitied Aunt Julie. But he also, from the personal point of view, was beginning to find her unendurable. She weighed upon his spirit. Some instinct of decency checked his perceptions before they became scathing or ribald: he had never felt the smallest desire to make a caricature of her: he did not yet actively dislike her, although at times he shrank from her feverish gusts of empty demonstrativeness: he was merely impatient with what he considered her intolerable nonsense. And if he was impatient it was not with-

out cause; for Aunt Julie, as if she ignored her own absurdity, had an extremely critical eye for the faults of others. She saw the faults, and she was deterred by nothing from her resolve to make them known. Imperfect herself, she was instinctively censorious. It may have been a form of self-defence. If she was not always outspoken, it was because she felt that silence and a dry smile would be more effective. It had always previously been so, in Aunt Julie's experience.

But Aunt Julie had a hard nut to crack in the Hunter family. Her dry smile seemed to go for nothing with the grinning Felix and the amused and all-suffering Ma. Her indirect rebukes to Felix for selfishness, her suggestions that discipline would improve Elsie, her general concern with the running of the house—all these slight exercises of Aunt Julie's personality—gave rise to no change in the family. Ma, gentleness itself, had her own views. Aunt Julie, smoking hundreds of the cigarettes which she said had been prescribed for her, and which were supplied by Felix, brooded upon the situation. She sat up in her bedroom for hours together, brooding upon it, and then came downstairs again evidently determined to make a fresh start.

When Aunt Julie came downstairs again evidently determined to make a fresh start, Felix felt a shudder steal over his body. He began not to look at Aunt Julie. That was a bad sign. It meant that his uncontrollable instinct had detected something in Aunt Julie which according to Felix's standard was ugly. And Felix hated ugliness almost more strongly than he loved beauty. He shrank from it. Ugliness of character was to him worse than physical ugliness. And, beginning with this instinct, Felix noticed more and more things about Aunt Julie. He noticed that her shrunkeness made her eyes look at times empty of all meaning, pale, gaping, and peculiar;

and her lips loose, a salmon colour, feeble—not the lips of health and alertness. He noticed her walk, the elaborately even way she had of saying “Oh” in a well-bred voice. When Aunt Julie said “Oh,” Felix wriggled with irritation. And in that “Oh” he sometimes detected a bitter exasperation second only to his own. As though Aunt Julie said her deep, dignified “Oh” when her first impulse had been to shriek. There was a shriek hidden in all Aunt Julie’s dignity; it was the shriek of goaded egotism and tattered and exhausted nerves. His perception also of the tough self-worship underlying so much of Aunt Julie’s punctilious courtesy showed him that her spiritual deterioration was far advanced. To the egotism of the young Felix was used, and he viewed it with compassion; but the old, he thought, had no business to be egotists. At fifty, every man or woman should resolve to live for others, and not for personal reward. Felix saw Aunt Julie as old, unhappy, as living in unreality. Her tears, which came readily, were no longer a painful cause of sympathetic emotion in himself; they were a source of boredom because they meant so little to Aunt Julie. They were not a relief; they were a habit. And in the end every tearful person becomes a bore to those who suffer her tears. Felix was bored. All his superficial kindness to Aunt Julie was forced; he had conceived distaste for her.

And sometimes Aunt Julie, as if she did not understand this, would come up behind Felix as he sat reading or working in a chair, and would put her arms suddenly around his head or his neck and draw him to her as one strangled, kissing him with what she conceived to be passionate tenderness; while Felix, cold because of the savage horror which made his flesh creep with repugnance of such display, or of such one-sided affection, would draw away and resume his work. And when he did this,

gently, with a smile, trying desperately not to show how much he loathed these exhibitions, Aunt Julie would cry savagely:

"You've got no feeling, Felix!" and would go upstairs to her room.

No feeling? Had Felix no feeling? Sometimes he felt so deeply, so vehemently, that he could have killed Aunt Julie for causing him such horror of her crazy emotionalism. What travesty of love!

iii

Aunt Julie had been out shopping one morning, and was in her bedroom afterwards, when Elsie came downstairs from the top of the house. She stumbled upon the landing outside Aunt Julie's door, and a glass fell from the tray she carried and smashed. Some confused talk could be heard from downstairs; and then there was silence. Elsie completed her journey, and put the fragments of glass into the dustbin. It was not until an hour later that Aunt Julie came down to lunch; and during the whole of the afternoon she was again in her room. When, as the time for Felix's home-coming approached, Ma and Aunt Julie sat awaiting his arrival, they had a small conversation which Felix presently interrupted. Ma, who was less cheerful nowadays than she had been at the time of Aunt Julie's arrival, was mending one of Felix's shirts. Aunt Julie opened the conversation by saying:

"What's that you're doing, Jessie?" Ma explained. "Oh . . . I should have advised you to patch, and use that fine stitch I showed you to sew the patch to the shirt . . ."

"That's what I'm doing," answered Ma, with a soft, almost a roguish, glance at Aunt Julie.

"Oh." It was a prolonged "Oh," like the sound a doctor makes when he does not understand a symptom.

There was a pause. At the end of it Aunt Julie launched out into sudden abuse of Elsie. She began to speak savagely; dignity was cast aside; a roughness of tongue and tone appeared.

"She's horrible—horrible!" cried Aunt Julie. "I can't think why you keep her. I wouldn't. I think she ought to go. Clumsy, unmannerly, impertinent . . ."

"She's very young," defended Ma. "She's a very will-ing worker. And I don't want to lose her."

"To lose her! There are plenty of girls," said Aunt Julie, with great decision. "Plenty. You're far too docile. Leave it to me. *I'll* get you one."

"No. I'd rather you didn't," answered Ma, with cool firmness. And then, laughing: "*Please* let me keep Elsie!"

Aunt Julie frowned at the levity. It was incomprehensible to her. Obstinate! Ridiculous! And an attempt to suggest that Ma knew best, which was insupportable.

"She's so *rude*," persisted Aunt Julie, with a return of savagery. "Unbearably so."

"She's not very polished, I admit. But she's honest and clean. Felix likes her."

"Pooh!" said Aunt Julie. "Honest!"

What she meant to convey, Ma did not know.

"Do you mean you've missed anything?" asked Ma.

Aunt Julie gave her dry smile. It was as though she said "you *poor* fool." But she did not say whether she had missed anything.

Felix at that moment came home. They heard his key in the lock, and saw Squiffins rise from his place by the fire in order to go and receive the wanderer. And then Felix's voice, as he spoke to the little cat . . . the rattle of his walking-stick in the hall-stand. And in an instant

the cheerful Felix himself, grinning and flushed with his walk in the wintry air. He greeted them, stooping to caress Squif, who walked before him and presently scrambled to his shoulder. Upon the mantelpiece, leaning against a blue and white china ornament, was a letter. The room was bathed in warm light, and when Felix threw the letter upon the fire there was a sudden bright flame.

Thus Elsie's character was left uncleared. She brought in Felix's supper with her usual sedate calm, broken only by a broad, affectionate smile as she set the meal before him. She was the same snub-nosed, hard-breathing, rosy-cheeked little girl. She came across the room with easy movements of health and strength; and then, upon her way out, with her hand upon the door-knob, she addressed Ma. She addressed Ma exclusively, as her mistress; but there was a cocked chin in another direction—a chin of defiance—which caught Felix's eye and made him look sharply at Elsie's flushed face.

"Ju want me any more tonight, mum?" she asked. She was standing very erect, and did not look at Felix. Even, he could have supposed, she turned her face as far as possible from him. Strange! he thought. Young Elsie ill? Surely something was wrong? Elsie lowered her head. Only her stubborn jaw indicated her mood. Yet she was unusually quiet. And upon leave being given, she ran to the kitchen for her overcoat and immediately left the house.

"What's Elsie been weeping for?" demanded Felix, as the front door was slammed.

Ma shook her head warningly. Her lips framed "Hush!"

"Oh!" said Aunt Julie, in a measured tone. "Has she been weeping? I didn't notice that. What is it, Jessie?"

Ma smiled with perfect frankness, which showed her

to be a master criminal, and again shook her head—but this time with a lightness as of unconcern.

"I expect she had got something in her eye," Ma suggested. "Unless Felix imagined it."

"Oh . . . Felix," said Aunt Julie, slowly, in some disdain. "Yes . . . Felix . . ."

And with that cryptic saying she rose from her chair, tottering slightly as she made her way to the door. She uttered no remark as she went out of the room; but Ma waited a moment after the closing of the door, and only then came over to where Felix was sitting.

"Don't say anything more about Elsie," she murmured, "before Aunt Julie. She's been trying to give me notice today. I wouldn't take it. I asked her to stay; and she's going to."

"Really?" Felix was horror-struck. "To give notice?" This was calamitous. "But why?"

Ma grimaced the words "Aunt Julie." She did not dare to say them aloud, for Aunt Julie's prowling habits and her extraordinary silence of movement inspired the greatest caution.

"Phew!" whistled Felix. And, in a low tone: "Then something's got to be done, Ma."

"Hush!" whispered Ma, her face suffused with pink. For the first time Felix noticed the anxiety which had been all the time in her expression. He was moved to quick reflection. When Ma took his plate and went into the kitchen for his sweet dish, he rose from the table without knowing what he did, and stood thinking and tapping his fingers lightly upon the cloth. He was puzzled and disturbed. His mind was stern. His thoughts seemed to dart hither and thither. What . . .

And with that the door opened, and Aunt Julie stole back to her chair by the fire. Felix looked at her as she came across the room, struck by something—he knew not

what. His reflections sharpened suddenly. How strange Aunt Julie looked. How . . . strange. . . . Was there something the matter with her? Something—he knew not what. The thought passed as it came.

iv

When Aunt Julie had gone to bed, Ma and Felix had a little talk. It took place while Felix smoked his last pipe, and after he had finished work for the evening. They sat in front of the fire in two comfortable arm-chairs, and faced the glow. Above them were blue and white ornaments and an oval mirror framed in dark oak. The walls were blue, and the big carpet upon the floor was a mingling of brilliant colours. They were very much at ease in this room, which was the room they had always wanted to have. Felix looked at the fire, and then at the blue and white ornaments, and then at Ma, who sat thinking, in a chair lower than his own. His attention was called in this glance to an expression of strain in Ma's eyes, to a new line in her brow, and to some faint diminution of plumpness between her cheeks and her lips. It struck Felix that Ma's colour was greyer than usual, and in fact that she was obviously worried and unwell.

"You're not looking very grand," he said to Ma, prompt to put into words any thought that came into his head. But Ma shook off, as if with scorn, the suggestion that she was ill.

"Nonsense. I'm all right . . . splendid," she asserted.

"So you would be if you were dropping," retorted Felix. "You want a change."

Ma shrugged.

"How can I?" she protested.

"Take it! Get rid of the Incubus. . . ." They both

giggled at this new name for Aunt Julie, and were silent. At last Felix broke the pause by asking:

"What are we going to do about her?"

"I do *not* know," said Ma. "Apparently she's got no idea of going back. She's very vague about it, at any rate. I think she'd really like to make her home with us."

Felix screamed under his breath.

"No!" said he. "I'd rather go into lodgings. She's been here nearly two months. She's wearing us both out. She's driving Elsie away."

"She isn't well, Felix," excused Ma. She looked frankly across at him with love and honesty. "She's really not well. She often sits and cries for no reason at all—that I can discover. The tears stream down her cheeks . . ."

"I've seen 'em," replied Felix, callously. "Now if *you* were to cry, it would *mean* something. With her—it's like blowing her nose . . ."

"Oh, no!" protested Ma, hurt by his insensitiveness. Her heart was softer. "No, the poor thing's really unhappy."

"Need *we* be made unhappy? It's self-preservation, Ma. Really. We shall die . . . Look here, could you *ask* when she's going back? Not ask her to go. I don't mean that. Just sort of play about the subject—generally—of homes, and journeys, and pathetically deserted husbands. . . . I suppose she's got plenty of money if she *wants* to go back?"

Ma faltered. For once she could not meet Felix's eye. There was even a slight delay in her answer, so little had she been prepared for this particular question.

"Well, no," she said. "She's got none. Poor thing, she's been expecting some ever since she arrived. She hasn't a farthing."

"Golly—d'you mean she's *really* broke?" Felix's eyes

were like the eyes of a prawn. He had perspiration upon his brow. Ma nodded.

"Even for stamps," she answered. "It's a horrible position for her."

"And what about the things she's been buying?" demanded Felix urgently. He was breathless. "Has she had the money from you? All of it? And . . . and our housekeeping bills? Oh, *Ma!*"

Her expressions had answered all his queries. He was uncontrollably reproachful. His skin was prickling as if ants walked upon it.

"She was to pay me back as soon as she had her money," said Ma. "I didn't want to bother you."

Felix sat aghast. His memory of old years of starvation had scarred him where money was concerned. He dreaded debt as he dreaded disease. And if debt had been accumulating since Aunt Julie's arrival—if no money ever came—and if Aunt Julie stayed on and on, spending freely as she had been doing—Felix shuddered. It was disaster.

"How much?" he asked. "Do, for God's sake, let's pay it all *now*. And let's send her back to Uncle Bernard. Oh, let's send her back. After all, he's used to her!" His mind revolved the problem: his face was quite white with the distress which he had been caused. He worked hard all the time, and gave Ma all the housekeeping money she needed, and he did not mind the work because they were happy and contented. But the word "debt" filled him with fear. Once again—by re-imagination of the past—his mouth watered with hunger. Never! The man who has once starved will be brutal rather than starve again. Felix could not keep still, but rose in agitation, taking two or three steps across the room before coming back and standing, absorbed in thought, upon the hearth-rug.

"Look, duckie," said Ma. "I'll find out exactly how much I owe, and tell you. I'm very sorry I didn't tell you at the beginning. I thought the money would come—and you needn't have been worried. But don't you see that we *couldn't* send her away poor and ill, as she is now. We couldn't do it." Ma was quite firm. She was also convincing. Felix realised that what she said was true. But his late momentary horror was still stirring within him. He looked down from his considerable height above Ma.

"Well, let's get a doctor. Let's get her well again. And *then* send her back. I know we can't send her away because she's poor; but we shouldn't keep her if she was rich. It's not richness or poverty that makes her an incubus. It's *herself*. Her appalling dignity and meddlesomeness . . . Well, she's on *all* our nerves. She's got us all bristling and indignant. Even Squiffins hides when he sees her—in case she wants to cuddle him."

They both laughed again; but with a tinge of apprehensiveness. After all, what Felix said was not to be contradicted. Squiffins ran for his life when Aunt Julie approached, and struggled against her caress.

"She won't see a doctor. I'll . . . I'll see if she has any idea of going back," said Ma, doubtfully. She sighed deeply at thought of her task. "I *will* do it," she added, her hands raised comically to her head. "Only, you see, it's rather difficult."

"Just supposing she never goes!" They were filled with fear. "Ma, are we crueller than other people, or much more considerate of their feelings?" demanded Felix suddenly.

v

Some days passed, and Felix was greatly occupied with work of several kinds. He kept his efficiency for the

office. It was remarkable what efficiency he had, considering that he hated the business of advertising. It seemed to him contemptible; and yet he was able to do all that was required of him in a way which gave satisfaction. Sometimes only he was not vulgar enough for the advertisers. He made their goods appear too high-class. Nevertheless, he had the *flair* which a quick brain sometimes develops, and Brinksons valued him. Their routine he left untouched; to their advertising he lent a mild and unpretentious distinction. His job was a good one, his liberty was increasing, and the respect of the principals was a sufficient testimony. Felix had no anxiety there. And at home, still working in the evenings and in other spare hours at his pen-and-ink drawings for periodicals of the cheapest variety, he managed also, at last, to complete to his moderate satisfaction the large sepia study of "The Upper Deck."

This drawing was brought downstairs; it was even put into an old frame, and mounted, so that the illusion of worth should be heightened. So also that "The Upper Deck" might escape the accidents inseparable from home life. The family assembled to inspect the picture. They stood in front of it—Ma, Aunt Julie, Elsie. But Elsie was not supposed to be there; she was only on her way from the kitchen when the exhibition took place, and lingered, her nose in the air, her eyes screwed round so that without appearing to look she could observe the portent. They were eyes like a robin's.

"Yes, it's very good," said Ma, in a moment. She went closer, and withdrew, and gave a slight enjoying laugh, which showed how pleased and proud she was. Felix had seen her nod, and was quite content. "You like it, Elsie?"

Elsie screwed her head upon her neck and sniffed.

"Yerce," she said, decidedly.

Aunt Julie at first made no comment. She said some-

thing that sounded like "Oh," flew for her glasses, and stood at different points in the room, scrutinising the picture. She came slowly nearer, her mouth critically pursed.

"Yes," she at last vouchsafed, in a rich, slow diction. "Yes. That's good, Felix. I don't know *how* I know; but I know. My judgment was always thought very well of in Rowlandstown. They used to bring me all sorts of things to decide . . . It's good. Oh, I can tell. There's a lot of work in that, Felix; a lot of thought." And then, abandoning her judicial tone, she moved towards Felix, and pulling down his head kissed him on the cheek. "Bless him!" she cried emotionally, and blew her nose. Thereafter, she went up to her bedroom.

Felix carried the picture upstairs again, and stood for some time regarding it alone. There *was* a slight glow of joy within him, an exultation. As though his heart were a little swollen. He could not repress a smile of delight, although he smiled with a sense of guilt. But presently Felix turned "The Upper Deck" with its face to the wall, and threw back the cloth which covered what stood upon the easel. Before doing this he softly closed the door of the room. As he contemplated the growing portrait of Estelle he shook his head with deep dissatisfaction. It was a lesson, a contrast. There had been something altogether greater in his object, and the portrait was a cause of bitter shame to Felix's self-esteem. There, before him, were recognisably the features he was seeking to paint. But the quality of the painting hurt him; he could not look at the portrait without realising that it should all have been done differently. Supposing he could have begun it all afresh, he might have done better; but even then his own incapability would betray him.

"Clumsy amateur!" he said aloud, in self-criticism. "Fool. Stupid impostor." And then, very soberly and

with humility: "Oh, my dear, if I could *paint*, I'd do you justice!"

Pulling the cloth over the easel again he returned to the ground floor; and as he passed Aunt Julie's room it seemed to Felix that he heard a faint groan from within. An electric memory ran through him. The low, deep sound was familiar. It had its place in his old experience. It was like the groan of Grumps.

"Ah!" cried Felix.

vi

Before leaving the house, he told Ma that he thought he had heard the groan; and when she did not seem at all alarmed he went out with an easy conscience. He was going to see Jacob at Jacob's home, and as he walked thither Felix was thinking of Grumps and of Grumps's daughter. Grumps had been dead for three years, and his going had been the cause of passionate relief to the Hunters. He had come to their Highgate flat almost daily, a pitiable old man with no purpose in life, a groaning patient whose sores and pains were so horrible that Ma was fain to wash immediately anything that he had touched, lest it should carry some unknown infection to the boys. And at last, worn out, a wretched barely-living creature, consumed with the care of his own feeble limbs, Grumps had died. He had been like an old cat, long past the state of being loved, who yet, because of the pity his weakness inspired, made demands upon affection already greatly overdrawn, and was clothed and fed and sheltered because otherwise he must miserably perish. And now, hearing this groan from Aunt Julie, Felix had swift remembrance, swift imagining. As Grumps had been, living on, helpless, so would Aunt Julie be. Felix was horrified at his own lack of affectionateness; to him old people, once love

for them had given place to pity or to the impatient obligations of relationship, were creatures of nightmare. They were not tragic as long as love lasted; to be old and loved was a beautiful state. But when love was gone, when these poor creatures must be treated with the kindness of aversion because anything but kindness would be squalid cruelty, then were the old most hideous. Then were they a suffocation to love and honest feeling. Felix shuddered at his own pictures of loneliness and suffering and the horrors of living without love in the world. He shuddered again at thought of the torment endured by those who could no longer love, but must care for those who had grown too feeble, too repulsive in ugliness or vacuity to be loved.

He reached Jacob's home white and shivering, more depressed than he could ever remember to have been. In his ears sounded a faint groan, the sinister knell of domestic content.

vii

The following evening when he reached home at the end of his day's work, Felix found the living-room empty of all living creatures but Squiffins. Squiffins had met him at the door, had come back in his company to the fire, and was stretching himself there before the cheerful blaze. He loved to lie in front of the fire, with his legs flung wide . . . Squiffins was a tabby, marked in rich browns; and Felix, looking down at his friend and admiring the beautiful grace and colouring of Squiffins, could not help thinking how much prized tabbiness in cats would be if it were more rare. Alas for common standards of taste! What folly was the human passion for valuing only those things which are few in number. To that passion he owed his own income, since it was the relative rarity of such

men as he that established their market value. Felix sighed. The words "And bishops in their shovel-hats were plentiful as tabby-cats" came into his head.

"You're an old marvel, Squif," Felix said, kneeling upon the floor, his fingers light among the luxurious softness of Squif's fur and relaxed muscles. Squiffins did not need to be told that he was a marvel. He knew it. One could tell that he knew it by watching the daintiness with which he licked his own paws, the unhasting enjoyment with which he spread each toe, and the engrossed care which he gave to his beautifully fawn underparts. Felix had made many drawings of Squif, but since he was not a J. A. Shepherd, Squif in motion was a perpetual defeat. Try as he might, Felix never could capture the lightness and grace of Squif as he ran or leapt or tumbled. Squif lay looking at Felix over the top of his head, his forepaws sweetly curled in the air. Something in his softness and grace reminded Felix of Estelle, and for the next few moments Squif had no audience.

There was a long pause, at the end of which, hearing Elsie's step upon the fringe of floor-boarding which surrounded the carpet, Felix looked up. She was cheerful, he saw, and her cheeks were glowing.

"You're to eat that quick, Mist' Felix," hissed Elsie. "It's soup."

It did indeed look like soup. Elsie hurried out of the room. Obediently Felix consumed the soup, and then fell to wondering why everything was so late this evening. As he reflected, it grew later and later every instant, and would presently be later still. Indeed, it was already later; and there continued to be no sign of Ma or Aunt Julie. Where were they?

At last Ma appeared. She came slowly, as if she were tired, and dragged one foot after the other. When Felix looked up to greet her, Ma smiled at him, but instantly

averted her face. He could hardly see her, but it appeared from that angle as though Ma's mouth was a little pinched, as it occasionally was when she was seriously troubled.

"Hullo!" said Felix. "What's up?" Ma shook her head, with a cheerful air, as if to say "nothing's up," and he went on: "Why's my dinner so late, and where's the celebrated Aunt Julie?"

"Oh," said Ma, briskly. "Aunt Julie's not very grand this evening. She's gone to bed. I'm sorry to be so late; but I've been behind all day."

"Hell!" thought Felix. He did not greatly care to be treated as a little boy; but instead of protesting further he went on eating. After all, life depended upon food. But his mind was busy with all sorts of jumbled thoughts, and out of them all came the thought that Aunt Julie was not well. "Has she seen a doctor?" he asked, knowing perfectly well that she had not done so.

Ma started. She had been thinking, and the speech had interrupted her.

"No. It hasn't been necessary," she answered, shortly.

"I've brought her some cigarettes. Shall I take them in as I go up?"

"No." Again Ma was decided. "I'll let her have them. Better not disturb her now. She . . . she may be asleep."

Felix finished his meal, and went out of the room to get the cigarettes from his overcoat pocket. As he returned with the box in his hand, he saw Ma, to his surprise, standing with her forehead upon her arm, which lay along the mantelpiece. Her shoulders were bowed. From the doorway she looked entirely without hope. His first impulse was to go to her, but a second thought was that Ma would rather be alone with whatever trouble now absorbed her. Felix went softly upstairs without revealing his presence. His heart was chilled with foreboding.

viii

He came down again at ten o'clock, when the house and the street were perfectly still. Ma was sitting in her arm-chair sewing, and a long stream of white cotton fell from her lap to the floor.

"Off to bed!" said Felix. "You look a perfect ghost."

"Yes, I don't know how it is," lied Ma. "I feel quite tired." She began to roll up her length of cotton, in preparation for going to bed.

"Yes," said Felix. "And you'll feel much better if you lie awake all night."

It was so unexpected that Ma laughed, with a little crowing sob in her voice.

"Oh, I shan't lie awake," she retorted. "No, no."

It was upon the tip of her tongue to add something; but she checked herself, kissed him, and went up to bed. Felix sat down in front of the fire and fell into a reverie. The white skin of Estelle, the tone of her voice, the soft delicacy of her hands . . . they were always present in his thoughts, hidden, ready for such a moment of solitude as this. Estelle seemed to be there before him, in her most gentle mood; and his fancy pictured her as looking at him with the inscrutable expression in her eyes which he had already once or twice surprised there in the course of their sittings. Was it love? Could it be? Could it be? The mere imagining of it made his heart beat and his cheek flush. Smiling to himself, Felix recaptured an instant of such interchange. It was the most evanescent thing, gone immediately, but a source of incommunicable happiness. Estelle . . .

The slightest rustle attracted Felix in this peaceful house. As he opened his eyes he saw the door of the room opening very slowly indeed, with stealth, as if a draught were driving it. There was a faint cracking, whether of

ankle or board he did not know; and as he leaned forward in his chair, breathlessly watching, two skinny fingers shewed upon the edge of the door, and then an elbow. And presently, low down, near the marauding hand, a face. A face familiar, but horribly strange. There was Aunt Julie, but so shrunk, her eyes so imbecile and vacant, her cheeks sunken and discoloured, her hair a tangled rope upon her shoulder. She appeared round the door, as if gropingly, and then, still holding the door, took one step into the room.

She was fully dressed in a black silk gown, but she seemed to be so wizened, so extraordinarily small and weak and huddled, that Felix sprang in alarm to his feet. Was she ill . . . was she mad? Aunt Julie's head moved slowly from side to side; she raised one trembling hand warningly in the air, as if she sought to put it to her lips, and said "Ssh," and again "Ssh . . ." There was a ghastly unsteadiness in her action. When she began to smile it was suddenly shocking.

"Mussn . . . make a noise," she whispered, with an arch bow. "No . . . Oh, no . . ."

"Christ!" The uncontrollable ejaculation rushed to Felix's lips. His hand was thrown to his face. He stared at Aunt Julie as one paralysed with horror. *This* was her illness! *This* loathed and horrible malady!

"Ahm . . . ahm not well, Felix . . . Ahm . . . not well, you see." She gave a slow, elaborate shrug. "Well, you can . . . see I'm not . . . not well."

"No, I see that," Felix said, gently, shuddering. "Hadn't you better . . . better go back to bed? Look, I'll help you." He came slowly towards her, conquering repugnance with an effort.

"No . . . no . . . no, no . . . You can see that . . ." Aunt Julie retained her hold upon the door, standing like a wisp in the corner of the room. She bent forward,

peeringly, her eyes gravely empty. Her voice was very low, like the voice of one dying, and as if it was overcome by weakness in its effort to maintain resonance and measure. "I'm . . . I'm all *right*, Felix . . ." Aunt Julie quavered reassuringly. "Nothing . . . nothing . . ." She waved her hand illustratively in the air. "I came down to thank you . . . to thank you . . ." Her voice sank to a whisper: she leant still farther forward . . . "the cigarettes. The cigarettes . . . I have to have them, you see . . ." Again, mysteriously, with archness, she whispered . . . "Doctor . . . You understand . . ." She followed the explanation with a dreadful travesty of her ironic smile.

Raising her hand once more, and bending towards him once more, Aunt Julie swayed. She pressed the door, which yielded to her weight; and before Felix could catch her she had swung round and slid sideways to the floor, where she lay faintly sniggering and groaning until he went to her aid.

CHAPTER XV: IN THE SPRING

i

FELIX said nothing of that night. If Ma knew anything, guessed anything, she gave no sign. The household resumed its normal state. In a couple of days Aunt Julie appeared once more, entirely natural, calm, dignified, unconcerned. She greeted Felix without a tremor. He might have dreamed the whole incident. But he knew that he had dreamt nothing. He knew that Aunt Julie was in the grip of disease. He knew that Ma had long since fathomed what he had just learned. He knew that Ma had a secret from him. It caused him extraordinary emotion that she should have a secret. She was a mystery. Her loyalty, although it had its counterpart in Felix, was to him a baffling thing. For Felix to have a secret was natural, but he had no secrets. For Ma to have one seemed to him to be beyond credibility. Wonderful woman. Wonderful to be so honest, to know and to give no sign of knowing. She had a face which wore the innocence of a child, because she was herself innocent; but awareness of all things lay inscrutably in her mysterious heart.

One other powerful effect which this experience had upon him was this. If Aunt Julie was really ill, and ill in such a way that she demanded care and protection, was it not worse than cruelty to send her forth as he had proposed doing? When Felix had found her an interfering and histrionic bore, he had thought little of letting her drift; now that she was a proved irresponsible, at the mercy of a stifled desire which now and again mocked

her resolves, how could he bear to shrug his shoulders at Aunt Julie's misfortune? It was upon the face of it impossible. She was a yoke upon his neck. By her weakness she made precisely that sort of claim upon Felix against which he had once railed to Jacob.

"Claims. . . . Weakness, and irresponsibility . . ." he muttered, gloomily. It was a hideous chain—the subservience of the strong to the weak. But Felix did not deny the claim. No swimmer will allow even a fool to drown. Even a useless and self-poisoned creature. Some instinct (as it seemed), or perhaps only some implanted moral conception, forbade all men the abandonment of the helpless. Felix forgot his brutality, and saw only his duty to the infirm. He felt aversion from Aunt Julie; but he was not therefore harsh in his manner to her or in his judgment of her default. There is a kind of pity with horror at its heart; and it was this pity which Felix had for Aunt Julie.

ii

And when Sunday was reached, and he awaited Estelle's coming, Felix felt his heart grow lighter. There was a lightness as of springtime in his breast; and indeed spring was not far away. Already there reached the cottage so high above London strong little breezes with sweetness in them. The cold, hard winds of winter were passing; and although these new breezes were not warm they carried such promise of the fragrances to come that they were unmistakably harbingers of a happier season. Felix knew as soon as he rose in the morning that the day would be fine. The earth already was uplifted. All was translucent grey, and low rain-clouds were passing. As he looked from the window, there came pale glances of sunlight, and the rain dried quickly under the roving, swishing gusts of a cheerful wind which arose from

nowhere in particular. The wind seemed to be playing hide and seek. It rushed round corners and subsided, as if it were hiding. And then came out again and made a roaring in the chimney. Felix laughed to himself as he saw the silent, respectable Sunday morning pushed and flurried by this sportive trick of nature. And as he laughed he saw the sun. The grey was all tinged with yellow, and the wet roof of a house opposite began suddenly to sparkle. This, he knew, was going to be a spring day. It was going to be bright and clear and happy. Rain and bitter cold were to be forgotten, as things forever past. Away with paint and colours and canvases and pencils. Away with models and sittings. Away with anxious surveys and strokes with the brush, the slow efforts of the unskilled hand, the pains of the lover turned artist. Away with them all. Felix knew a better fashion of spending a spring-like day than that of working in a rough-and-ready studio, setting out his heart in pigment. He was for the open air.

And that was why, as Estelle walked up Highgate Hill that morning, because there was no tramcar to grunt and grind its laborious way by the cable, she became aware that Felix was bearing down upon her in the most jovial and high-spirited manner. He came stepping down the hill as if he were a giant; and she saw his feet, which were long and were encased in long shoes; and next a brown suit, and a tiny spot of red tie to brighten the brown of the clothes, and a soft white collar, and a light-brown hat above all the rest. . . . And under the hat Felix's hair, now darker in colour than copper, and his fresh skin and large mouth and indeterminate nose and brown eyes. And a grin. It must have been the hill, or the rapidity with which she walked, or the unexpectedness of this sight of Felix, that brought a deeper bloom to the cheeks of Estelle. She stopped with a little cry of

surprise; and neither she nor Felix quite noticed, although possibly both knew, that Felix had in greeting taken both of Estelle's hands as they were half held out to him.

"You're not coming to sit for me!" cried Felix, gaily. "You think you are, but you aren't!" He laughed at Estelle's bewilderment, and when he saw that she was dressed in his favourite blue he was the more enraptured. He would have kissed each eyelid separately, and each soft, cool, peachlike cheek, and Estelle's parted lips of sweetness with the best grace in the world. He was in a happy, eager, and high-spirited mood which would have stopped at nothing. She was adorable. She could not but ask, he felt, to be kissed, because he could not imagine any man so far sunken in dotage as to see her without the strongest desire to kiss her. This was not so much logic as a self-evident proposition. It allowed of no answer. "Yes," he repeated. "You *think* you are . . ."

"And what *am* I going to do?" asked Estelle, falling into his mood with the most charming air of naïveté. "If you know."

"You're going," said Felix, who had not yet made up his mind. "At least, I *think* you're going with me to Kew."

"To Kew!" Estelle turned sharply, also in high spirits. "Lovely! Come along!" she cried. "Let's go quickly. . . ." Together they stepped down the hill, their faces glowing, and their eyes sparkling with happiness.

iii

As they went, the sun grew stronger. It was early in the day, and in the shuttered main streets of the suburban districts through which their several omnibuses passed there were at first no people at all. Everywhere there was the hush of Sunday, of all those who lived in the

suburbs lying late, or sitting half-dressed at the dingy windows reading "The People" or "The News of the World." Milk-barrows and carts; men who sold papers outside empty public-houses, with their contents-bills lying flat upon the pavement, pinned down by stones; other omnibuses, tramcars, and an occasional motor, were all that Estelle and Felix saw upon their journey. And then, when they were through the West End, and out upon the route to Kew, they saw trim people going to church. Men in spruce black suits and silver watch-chains and bowler hats that were worn only on Sundays; women in badly made costumes, little girls with horses' tails of carefully brushed hair down their backs; and little boys standing about with Eton collars and caps and little bowler hats, kicking the kerbstones and hopping up and down in a dreary effort to kill time. And always shops and shops, standing in rows like soldiers at drill, unctuously closed and seeming to have downcast eyes, as if in secret they mourned the lost profits of the day. And the sun went higher and higher, and its warmth made the sluggards peep out of their windows, and hasten to dress and come forth; so that presently the streets began to stream with people in bright stiff clothes. All this panorama of life kept Felix silent. He watched it eagerly, supremely content that he should be travelling thus with Estelle at his side and with the prospect before them of a whole day of undivided happiness. There was a radiance everywhere; but the heart of Felix was warmed and more radiant than anything else in the world. He was so happy that he could not speak. It was a miracle.

iv

When at last they reached Kew, the Gardens were not open, so for a time they walked along the south bank of

the river, looking at occasional boats and oarsmen engaged in their craft. And at one moment during this sedate and amiably conversational walk they saw an extraordinary sight.

"Look!" cried Estelle. "An eight. How strange they . . . *Are* they men?" She was puzzled. Felix looked in his turn, and was impressed. The long boat almost abreast of them in the stream was indeed an eight, and the rowers were all girls. Only the coxswain was male, and he was a very old man in a shabby peaked cap, with a long grey beard spreading over his chest. His tie was a flowing scarlet, his waistcoat was purple, with brass buttons. Although his shoulders were bowed with age, they were superbly broad, and he was a figure of distinction. He managed the boat with entire understanding, and his crew as a whole was a splendid body.

"That's the celebrated and rambling and inaccurate scholar Dr. Swinburne," Felix told Estelle.

"Hush! He'll hear!"

"He wouldn't mind. He's trained all those girls—taught them to row and everything. He's covered pages and pages with rambling notes, filled with all sorts of most eccentric spellings and judgments, crawling over texts like a fly that's been in the ink. And yet, in his way, he's a great man," admitted Felix. "Or so I'm told."

Estelle laughed at the sudden abandonment of omniscience.

"Who told you?" she asked, inquisitively. Her clear eyes, the almost mischievous glance she gave him, were exciting to Felix. She was so dangerously near and intimate, and this place, he knew, was so repulsively public, that he was forced to look straight before him.

"A man I meet every day at lunch. A man called Tadworth. He's a bit of a scholar himself. That is, he's

read a great deal of Middle English and Elizabethan literature."

"How funny; you've never mentioned him to me," said Estelle. "I thought Mr. Harcourt was the only friend you had." There was almost a sharpness in her voice. Her expression was so surprised that Felix could not help smiling, and teasing her.

"Did you think he was enough—too much—for me?" he asked. "Old Jacob . . ."

"No. Only . . ." She hesitated. "Most of the men I've known seem to have had only one friend."

Men I've known. Felix's heart quickened. She spoke of something past. Men . . . Was there something, perhaps, ever so slightly experienced in her way of treating him? Ten years, and the previous acquaintance ended by a broken tryst, by a desertion in favour of Jack Howell . . . Other men . . . Felix trembled. His heart was sick. And then, his jealousy, so great because he loved so much and knew so little, vanishing before his native temper of trust, Felix recovered from momentary baseness. Of course she knew, she had known, other men. Why then be affected by thought of it. Good God, what a cad love made him!

Felix had, nevertheless, under his apparent coolness, a fear. He could not bear to lose her now—unless she dismissed him. And in that case—what? He was not of the tougher kind of men who can sue. He knew it, and it was undeniable. The alternative to success was misery. Not a broken heart, because hearts no longer broke, but despair, numbness, stupefaction. What folly! His electrical thoughts were gone, chased by shame. Felix answered Estelle's remark.

"Perhaps they've had only one *girl* friend," he said lightly. "How could they want more?" And then, becoming serious because he saw that Estelle was serious:

"I don't know; I think I've got several men I regard as friends. I don't call an acquaintance a friend, though some people seem to have to do it, poor devils. See, there's Jacob, and Tadworth. Jacob you know—or at least you *think* you know, though he's a well of truth; Tadworth you've just heard of . . . And a man called Thomas—he's an artist of sorts. He draws nothing but babies, because editors won't take anything else from him; but he really does landscape better than anything. I'd like to tell you about Thomas. And of course Sloan and Tucker—they're just chaps, you know. Men in offices who live at places like Ilford and Raynes Park. And awfully nice chaps too."

"But *friends!*" Estelle was incredulous. "Not just people you know!" Her cheeks were quite flushed. "*Friends!*" Felix stared—at the colour, at the moved, unsteady voice. Did she think he would lie to her? It was too absurd. What was the trouble? Estelle continued, still with feeling in her tone: "You've never spoken to me about *any* of these people. Never mentioned them. They might not have existed. I should never have heard of them if I hadn't asked. Oh, Felix; you're *strange* . . . *strange*. To have friends . . . I don't feel I know you at all."

She had turned away, was shrugging, her colour still high.

"Because I have more than one friend? Don't you think I'm very lucky?" He was amused, teasing, baffled—perhaps obtuse in his ignorance of her grounds of protest.

Estelle turned back to him; and he could tell from the way her face was reddened that she was labouring under some strong, some inexplicable emotion. He had never seen her so unreserved. Her coldness was gone.

"Don't you see, it's not the number of friends. It's

the fact that I thought I knew you; and now I find you've never thought it worth while to tell me about any of your friends. As if you didn't want me to know. As if you thought . . . Oh, well . . . Who *are* they; and what do they do? It's so *strange* of you." That was what she always came back to—the strangeness of his silence. Suddenly, as if she stabbed, Estelle demanded: "D'you know as many girls?"

v

A start shot through Felix at the tone, at the inquiry and the glance by which it was accompanied. The start was one of involuntary pleasure; but it was not wholly pleasurable. There was another emotion mixed with his surprised joy. It was a secret amazement at such suspicion when his heart was open to her. Did she want an inventory of his acquaintance? Could she *really* mistrust him?

"I know a few girls," he said. "But I don't see what that's got to do with *us*. We take pleasure in each other, not in gossip. We've got lots to learn—I about you, as much as you about me. More. If I were to ask you for things you haven't told me—wouldn't there be hundreds? I'm very fond of my friends, but they're not the whole of my life. You've had—you've *got*—friends that I don't know, and never heard of. You spoke just now of other men you knew who had only one friend apiece."

"Oh," said Estelle, as if suddenly recovering herself, as if mocking him for responding to her emotion with sincerity. "So I did."

She said no more upon the subject, but walked along leaving Felix very much mystified by such surprising questions. Was she really concerned? Did it really matter to her? He wished he knew. He was full of perplexity. Words—fateful words—were upon his lips; and

then her new coldness checked him. She was now distant from him by the farthest divergence of character. Did she love him?

They went a little farther along the bank of the river, and then turned so as to enter the Gardens soon after the gates had been opened to the public. And here, strolling along the green aisles and under the bare branches of huge over-arching trees, they were once again, to all appearances, in complete accord. The bizarre interlude was over, and comedy once again held the stage.

vi

"Tell me about Thomas," suddenly demanded Estelle.

"Thomas?" That she should have remembered the name! "Well, Thomas is—he's got a funny face, dark brown, like a potato. It's all shut up. And he peeps out of his eyes—'like parrots at a bag-piper.' And he sees everything."

"More than you do?"

"I? I don't see anything at all." She demurred. "I never see anything."

"No," said Estelle, coolly. "You don't see everything, do you . . ." She smiled to herself.

"He's very small, and keeps his hands in his pockets. And he's broad, and stands as if his bones were deeper than usual in their sockets. And he snaps at everything, so that you'd think he had a liver, and swears 'By Cripes!' which always sounds to me the most obscene oath I ever heard, though I don't think it's got any meaning. And he walks about everywhere, night and day, in shabby clothes with an old hat cocked over one eye. He's one of the lucky ones who don't need much sleep. He goes and drinks coffee at stalls after midnight—not as Smart People do, who think they're great comedians and charac-

ters for doing it,—but because that's his way. And hears men planning burglaries, and sees them whip off their leather belts and slash one another. He's full of such yarns, and doesn't fear a belt. He gives me the impression of knowing about the sort of life that's going on all the time. Not just the life of polite days and newspapers and theatres, but exciting life—the life of what are called he-men. Wonderful. He knows all sorts of ruffians.”

Estelle murmured at the picture. All the same, she appeared to understand Felix's wistful glance at the spirit of adventure which for him had been checked at the age of eight.

“If Thomas knows all this, couldn't you meet his other friends—go with him?” she asked.

“I *have* met some of them. I like them, but I don't want to know them well. I should hate to have them arriving drunk with their lady friends at midnight, and waking Ma out of her sleep, and frightening Aunt Julie out of her wits with bloody fights on the doorstep. They're that sort—picturesque, but a bit rowdy. I detest rowdiness. And I shouldn't like to go about with him, like a tag. And I suppose I really, at the bottom of my heart, prefer to do other things—so I don't rove alone. It's such a conflict, always. Like wanting to be a sailor and a brigand and a journalist . . . and *being* a clerk. A mystery. I suppose all men have the same conflict. It's not just me, I mean. All except the grim-faced creatures who 'make good'—who start as pit-boys and end as bosses. Sometimes I'd like to be a pit-boy who's going to be a boss. Or an errand-boy who makes a million in shoddy. In fact I don't know what I do prefer. There are so many things that attract the eye and the mind and all parts of you.”

Estelle nodded vigorously.

“Yes,” she said. “That's quite true.”

"There's beer and pictures and the stars," said Felix. "All good things, brother."

"And dancing and pickles," added Estelle.

"And Kew Gardens," he thought aloud. "And lunch." He looked about him at the trees, and through them at the green vistas and brown trunks and boughs and a brilliant sky. But that was because Felix had such a strong sense of the present situation, and shunned fancy as affected. "And friends," he presently suggested, with sly malice. Estelle took no notice of the gibe at her recent discomposure. Instead, she furnished a supplement of her own:

"And theatres and the sea and quarreling."

"And falling in love." Felix looked aside. She was walking very near him, quite restored to delight, and he could not see her expression at his final sallies.

"But that's not a thing you *want* to do," said Estelle, at last.

"Some people," he told her, gently. She shook her head, looking away from him.

"No."

"I'm sure."

"No. They don't *want* to."

Felix shrugged. There was no answer to this defiance.

"After all," he said, "it's a great temptation. Everybody is trying to feel as much as they can. Ritualists and drug-takers and novel-readers and artists . . . And it's a very beautiful sensation to love and to be loved."

"Is it?" Estelle spoke in a hard tone. "I don't know anything at all about it."

There was a moment of silence between them in which both were stifled.

"I'm very much in love with you," ventured Felix, as if illustratively. He felt his heart beating fiercely. He had spoken the words because they would not be restrained,

but it was to the air. He was afraid. They were blurred out in a desperation not the less intense for the casual tone he used. Then: "I'm awfully in love with you," he repeated, more earnestly.

Felix, in a blur, saw Estelle brilliantly fair in the sunshine, her hair gleaming and her blue dress like a slender mass of lupins against the green. He saw her stop and look carefully in front and behind, to see if anybody was near. She stood quite still, facing him, closer to him, expectant; and Felix, careless of all, put his arms round her, laughing. Estelle, too, was smiling curiously. Her hat scratched his nose, and he cared nothing. Her head was lower than his, and he had either to stoop or to tilt it up in order to kiss her. But she was inert and passive in his arms, her soft body relaxed to his embrace, and her lips as eager as his own. Felix, with beating heart and amazed exultation, was overwhelmed by her voluptuous yielding. Such love, such undisguised and exciting passion, was something outside his experience. He had never been so happy. He could see Estelle's white forehead, which was like fine ivory, and see her closed eyes, and feel the tender cheek against his own, so soft that it was a shock to his senses. Her arms were raised, her lips formed only for kisses.

vii

And so did they stand until, with a start, Estelle pulled herself free, and turned away, with her hands to her crooked hat and ruffled hair. Other people were in sight, coming towards them in the distance along that wide green alley with the over-arching trees. Felix could barely see them, so remote were they. She must have known by instinct. Still with her hands to her hair, Estelle began to walk down a bye-path, and when Felix, following, would have put his arm round her again she eluded him

and then, coming up behind, took his arm and pressed it tightly against her bosom. And as Felix cocked his eye down at her, Estelle shook the arm, and laughed. She was as happy as he, her eyes bright, her cheeks flushed, her lips parted.

"Oh," she said conversationally. "And so you love me, Mister Felix Hunter."

"I do," he agreed. "I daren't ask——"

"What?"

"Well, that's just it. It seems so impossible that you can feel the smallest affection for me——"

"Oh, no, I don't," Estelle hurriedly cried. "It wouldn't be nice." She was flirting with him. "And so I suppose you'll go home and think I . . . think I don't care for you?"

"I don't expect I shall be thinking anything. I shall just be singing praises to God."

"Oh." Estelle looked a little disappointed. "Not to me?"

"That's my hypocrisy. I shall really be meaning you all the time."

"Don't be blasphemous." Estelle again shook Felix's arm. They emerged on to an open lawn.

"And what do I see here," demanded Felix.

"What, a crocus—a snowdrop?"

"Better—a place where they sell food."

He led the way to the glowing spot where little tables and chairs were placed temptingly under the shadow of the trees and very near a large refreshment hut. Even lovers cannot walk indefinitely in Kew Gardens. Even lovers——

After lunch they strolled about the lawns until the sun began to lose his power, and the wayward wind of the

morning, released from Sunday School, began to fly in the faces of that congregation of persons who strolled in the gardens. And as Estelle, clinging to Felix's arm, shivered once—from happiness—they knew that they must think of returning before the dusk fell.

"Don't want to go home," sighed Estelle, her face against Felix's shoulder.

"No." Felix was thoughtful. "Look here, come to Highgate . . ."

"Oh! What'll your mother think? Don't tell her tonight. Not yet . . . Just us . . ."

It had never occurred to Felix to imagine that Ma would feel anything but pleasure; but with the question raised there darted into his mind a sudden fear. He felt a little blank.

"She'll be delighted," he swore, to comfort her.

"I wonder." Again that hardness. "*We could* go home; only . . ."

"No, Highgate's much better. Let's go. Come on!"

"Why much better?" He could feel her body against his. Estelle's tone was lingering.

"Because . . . Well, for one thing, because I'll be able to take you home afterwards," said Felix.

Estelle nodded profoundly, gloating.

"Clever boy," she praised. And then, struck by a startling idea: "Felix, I didn't know you were like that."

"You've made a mistake, my gel," said Felix, suavely. "You don't know me after all."

He was surprised to see upon Estelle's face a curious look as though she had clenched her teeth in order not to cry, or as though . . . He had seen young mothers look hungrily at their babies, and there was something akin to that expression in what he now saw. Estelle's cheeks were slightly puffed. Her eyes were unguarded. Intuitively, he guessed that if they had been quite alone

she would have clung to him as she had done earlier. It would have been her reply. He was moved and excited by knowledge of her love, of her passion for him.

ix

They reached Highgate in time for a late tea. They came sportively into the house, in the most boisterous spirits, and talked volubly, with shining eyes and cheeks; while Ma and Aunt Julie, who had taken their tea an hour previously, listened and sat by the fire, amused at the badinage. And it was strange to see how, upon this occasion, for the first time, Estelle showed familiarity in the house. She helped to get the tea, running like a small girl from kitchen to living-room and back again, opening cupboards and taking the tea-cosy from its place; and then, when tea was done, gathering the plates together as a matter of course. It was all uncalculated, significant . . . The others watched her excitement. Such spirits in one as a rule so composed could only mean unbearable stress of gaiety.

"Felix and I will wash up!" Estelle said, familiarly.

"Oh, no!" cried Ma, rising in haste from her chair.

"The idea! With that pretty dress."

"I'll do it," said Aunt Julie, gravely, and in a very resonant voice. "Leave it all to me . . ."

"No, no. *We* will." Estelle was abrupt with Aunt Julie. To Ma, she said: "I could wear an apron . . . Is there one?" There was no question in her mind, evidently. She had said they would wash up; and she assumed the protests to be mere politeness, whereas it was the acquiescence which proved to be a politeness. Felix knew that she wanted to be alone with him so that they might kiss; he too was eager to be with her, to feel once more the rapture of her softness within his arms. He was flurried

and uncertain with his own thrilling happiness and a sense of conflicting elements in the atmosphere. He supported Estelle's determination, thereby showing his own complicity in the excitement.

And afterwards, when the dishes had been lengthily dried, and they were again back in the warm room, they sat talking freely for a while, and Estelle could not refrain from looking lovingly at him, and showing by every movement that she was bored by Ma and Aunt Julie, that she wanted only to be alone with Felix and to be in his arms, passive as the feeding baby. And presently, as if she had been striving to find some pretext for leaving the others, and at last had attained it, Estelle said:

"Done any more to the portrait, Felix?"

Felix shook his head. He had been dreaming. A little spot showed in either cheek, and his eyes gleamed.

"No. I splashed a bit the other evening."

Estelle was pensive for the smallest fraction of time.

"I'd like ever so much to see it," she murmured, in the tone of a longing child.

There could be only one answer to this.

"I'll get it down," said Felix, rising. He was already half-way to the door, when:

"No!" cried Estelle. "I'll come upstairs."

It was impossible to gainsay her; but instinctively, as they both turned, Felix glanced at Ma. Her face was quite changed. She was grown haggard. From her eyes there looked out such pain, such horror, such understanding, that he felt his heart stop beating. The expression was like a blow to Felix—the tragic revelation of a whole web of sensations. The colour left his cheeks, ebbing until they were ashen. He stood quite still.

"Why, Felix, how *white* you are!" It was Estelle who spoke. Her hands were upon his arm; her eyes were anxious, possessive. Felix looked back into them. He

faltered. Then, with memory of the cause of his faintness, he suddenly drew himself from contact with her.

"I'll just sit down," he said, breathlessly. D'you mind not seeing the picture tonight?"

And with that he brought a chair for Estelle. His mind was in torment. He could see and hear nothing. Was it to be thus?

x

They went home to Holloway by a long route which was beautiful upon this early Spring evening. Even when the wind rushed at them and forced them together against its onset they were happy. Only in Felix's heart lay still that dagger of dread. He loved Ma as he could never love anybody else; the love he had for Estelle was something different. It was a fire, a zest, an ichor in his veins. There was no comparison between the loves. There was no comparison between the two women. Even now he knew it.

"You *are* quiet," pouted Estelle. "Are you tired? I wonder what made you go faint. Is your heart all right?"

"It's in the right place, anyhow," Felix assured her, with the utmost impudence.

"Where's that?" she asked, impudently.

"Can't you feel a sort of knocking—a sort of bumping—a congestion—here?" He laid a light finger upon the front of her dress. "That's it."

Estelle laughed. She was almost dancing beside him. She pressed her cheek against his shoulder in happy, uncontrollable caress.

"I can't feel anything there!" she asserted.

The night was around them, and there was no moon in the sky. Everything was faintly whispering in the breeze. Only lovers like themselves were in the lonely roads, lovers standing embraced in silence, or talking in hushed tones

about bacon and wages and clothes and the conversations they had had with other people. And Felix and Estelle, as if they trod the breeze, went on, and sometimes stopped for a breathless instant of caress, until they reached unavoidable streets which were public. And then, coolly and sedately, they walked until they came to Cornwallis Road, where they parted, kissing in the shadow of that same hedge before which Felix had seen Estelle with Jack Howell.

"Good night, my love, my dear . . ." breathed Estelle, so tenderly that she seemed almost insensible in his arms. And after the farewell returned again and again, as though she could not bear to let him go.

Elated, his blood burning, Felix turned from the house. His body seemed to tingle with joy, with excitement and tumultuous happiness. Each moment of the day was to his charged memory an ecstasy. He laughed and strode faster, and stopped, looking deep into the mysterious sky as though in its blackness he was able to rest in divine ease. What joy, what joy, sang his heart. Felix had never been so exhilarated. Paradise was before him, and the gates were wide. . . . He came thus along the deserted roads, his face bare to the winds.

Only as he walked, as with each step he came nearer home, did Felix become unwillingly aware that another mood was struggling with his happiness. It was a mood which belonged to the whole of his life. It was rooted in his childhood, his days and year of growth; it possessed him, because it was his nature itself. And as he went onward, thinking of Ma alone, Ma thinking only of him, and living in his service, Felix knew that his heart was like water within his breast. Twice he sighed heavily. Upon his lips appeared a strange smile, but the gravity of his eyes was the true index to his preoccupation.

CHAPTER XVI: CONFLICT

i

WHEN one walks without map or sense of direction along a winding lane it sometimes appears that the road is endless. And then, without warning, the end of the journey springs out of the earth, where it has been all the time. Just so it happened with Aunt Julie's visit to the Hunters. Yet the conclusion of her visit was brought about by the instrumentality of Felix. Felix it was who took in hand that matter. I said at the beginning of this book, which is so far away that everybody must have forgotten it, that Felix had the unscrupulousness of a woman; and it is as true now as it was when the statement was made. He had several difficulties upon his hands, and it was essential that they should be dealt with. Aunt Julie was his first difficulty.

"Have I ever *seen* Uncle Bernard?" he asked one morning, at breakfast. Aunt Julie sat at the side of the big table, and Ma at the other end. Both were in their morning dresses, ready for the day's domestic tasks. Elsie had come, and was pattering about in the kitchen. Felix's remark had been a sudden affair, born in a period of that rather crestfallen silence that belongs to breakfasts at which there is a stranger present. And it was given therefore an adventitious importance: Uncle Bernard? They reflected. Had Felix ever seen him? No; he never had. Uncle Bernard was unknown to him save by report. There *was* such a person, for Felix: no more. He might have

been legendary, like Robin Hood, or Barabbas. "Hn. Strange," said Felix. And was silent.

His very silence was provocative. The others both forgot their breakfast.

"Why do you ask, Felix?" demanded Aunt Julie, at length.

"Oh, nothing . . . that is, nothing *really*." Felix tried to appear unconcerned. Ma looked closely at him, suspecting a joke, and not finding any evidence against him.

"But you must have had *some* reason?" It was Aunt Julie, who looked like a sort of heavenly sheep, solemnly blinking and recalling earthly grass with mixed feelings.

There was a little pause. Felix went on with his breakfast, while Ma and Aunt Julie watched him, fascinated. Ma was as fascinated as Aunt Julie. Aunt Julie stared with her pale, empty eyes. She was in an extremity of contemplation, her mouth and chin moving as she finished munching a difficult piece of bacon.

"Felix!" she said at last. "Tell me."

"It's strange," murmured Felix, reluctantly. "I keep dreaming about him."

"Dreaming?" There was an awed note in Aunt Julie's voice. "How interesting."

"He's tall, isn't he? And thin, with glasses, and a long fair moustache?"

"Yes, yes. . . ." She became agitated at the recapitulation of her husband's distant features. The reality passed like a film across her eyes.

"A slight impediment in his speech."

"Oh, no!" cried Aunt Julie, warmly.

"Ah, then he has a difficulty in breathing," Felix reported. "Keeps trying to say something. I never can make out what it is."

"How remarkable! How . . . remarkable!"

"Nonsense!" objected Ma. "He's making it up."

"No; that's very strange," said Aunt Julie in her measured, mellow voice of reserve. "How many times have you dreamt this, Felix?"

"Oh," said Felix. "Often—three or four or five times. It is curious, isn't it."

Aunt Julie became very grave. She assented; thought for a moment; then blew her nose. It seemed as though she winked away a ready tear.

"And he never says anything?" she asked anxiously.

"No. No. That's so strange," answered Felix. "However, I don't expect it means anything at all." He went cheerfully on with his breakfast, with one eye on the clock. It was within two minutes of his latest time for leaving the house. Brinksons awaited him, and Felix loved punctuality with an aspiring love.

"I'm not so sure," murmured Aunt Julie, slowly and gravely. "Telepathy's a very funny thing." In a moment she added "Oh," because she was thinking of all that Felix had said, and conning it. Quite three minutes later, when Felix was putting down his cup for the last time, Aunt Julie repeated: "A *very* funny thing." And with that she slowly arose, and went out of the room, walking very erect in her long skirt, her hair waving upon both sides of her as she walked.

"Felix," said Ma, urgently. "It's too bad. You haven't really been dreaming, have you?"

"Of course I have!" cried Felix, indignantly. "What d'you mean, woman!"

He seized his hat and light overcoat and was gone before she could question him further.

ii

Now whether Felix had dreamed anything at all I do not know. I believe he had dreamed exactly what he

said he had dreamed; but with Felix one can never be quite sure. He will describe a thing as though it has actually happened, and then by some extravagance will reveal his story as an elaborate and circumstantial lie. But the real reason I believe he had dreamed about Uncle Bernard is that otherwise his story would have been a cruelty. It would be unlike Felix to perpetrate a cruelty in cold blood, even though it indicated the way to action an incubus might suitably take. And so I think he must have dreamed this thing, and repeated his dream without ulterior motive.

Nevertheless, within a fortnight, Aunt Julie, having cabled at Felix's expense to Uncle Bernard, and having learned in cable reply that he was in reality unwell, prepared to return to the other side of the world. She was dignified to the last. She packed without haste every treasure which she had brought and took back some trifles which she had strewn about the house as having decorative value. She dressed for the journey with as much care as she would have shown had she been going to a party; and when the cab came she kept it waiting while she re-tied her veil. Felix accompanied her to the London terminus, and found her a corner seat in the railway carriage, and bought papers which she might read on the journey. And then talked with assiduity until the guards and porters began to slam doors and call out to travellers to take their seats. It was an emotional moment, but he endured it with the fortitude of a visionary. The train moved slowly out of the station, with Aunt Julia a wan little figure standing and waving at the carriage window, so small and obscure and pathetic a figure that he had a swift instant of deep pity for her. A tear started to his eye. . . . After all, she was an unhappy woman, who had endured much hardship; was there not this to be urged in excuse of her eccentricities of behaviour? Hard,

hard Felix; that he could so excuse and sympathise with the weak, and yet find it so impossible to live in their company.

Then Felix went home to Ma; and they sat in the warm blue living room with such a sense of breathless freedom that the walls of the room seemed to expand. Everything seemed larger. They were both cheerful, eager, laughing to each other with the readiness of light hearts.

"Isn't it extraordinary what a difference it makes to everything. Why, this is really a most beautiful room!" cried Felix. "I was beginning to hate it."

"Now, Godfrey will be able to come home," added Ma.

"He's a coward. But I should have been the same; so we won't blame him too much. It'll be nice to see old Godfrey. I wonder what he's like. Much changed, I expect. We'll call him Rip Van Winkle. But I say, Ma; what's that peculiar noise?" He stopped suddenly. "*Don't* say she's come back!"

They listened in terror.

"I don't hear anything," said Ma, at last. "What sort of noise?"

"Sort of—sort of moaning. . . ." Felix described. He tip-toed to the door, listened for a moment, and then, leaning against the wall for support, was convulsed with laughter that brought tears of relief to his eyes. "Why it's Elsie—*singing!*" he gasped. Even *she* . . .'

iii

Aunt Julie was the first of Felix's difficulties. She was the lightest of them. His next task, and the most difficult of all, was the psychological management simultaneously of two women. Management, perhaps, is too strong a term. It should be rather shepherding, suasion. . . . Felix did not pride himself on the power to "manage" any-

body, as I have heard one or two young men and women of the present day expressly do. He hoped. What is prayer but hope sped upon its way to supposed Omnipotence? And if he had been able to limit himself to either Ma or Estelle there is no knowing what Felix might have done by hoping. His task, however, was to keep both in play until a common interest should unite them. He was to reconcile Ma sufficiently to Estelle to make his marriage acceptable; he was to manœuvre Estelle into actions and speeches and general behaviour which would commend themselves to Ma. Owing to his natural delicacy of mind, he could not involve Estelle in a conspiracy: she must do all these pleasant things spontaneously, without explicit prompting from him. There must be no plotting. Felix was not an intriguer. He was a God. You remember his republic of Halmas? So was it governed—by the beneficent creator's will for good. You understand, Felix planned or manœuvred nothing; he merely wished. His wishes, which in that respect, as I have said, resemble the silent wishes—or prayers—of all simple people, were very potent. But he had to do with—not one woman, but two women; not one plane of character, but two; with two women who were different in grain, who were instinctively hostile to one another.

When, therefore, Ma and Felix laughed together at the departure of Aunt Julie, there was a kind of eagerness, of false bonhomie, in their laughter. Both were trying to pretend that there was nothing the matter. They prolonged their laughter by the smallest shade of merriment because of this subtle understanding of divergence which they shared. They were at cross-purposes, and they knew it. Nothing—whatever the outcome of the present crisis—could ever be again quite as it had been. And so they were sensitive to each other, Felix with a

divided allegiance where there had previously been one only; Ma clinging to the old affection with the desperate refusal of fanaticism to face a contrary. Her kiss, when "good-night" came, was a little deeper, a little more unconsciously pleading, than she guessed or intended. She looked at Felix very seldom; she did not give the impression of being troubled or careworn or in any degree uncertain of him; she was, as far as human nature would permit, the same Ma that he had always known.

And Felix had sometimes the creeping dread that in kissing his cheek Ma would one day detect the faint scent of powder. If she ever did this she gave no sign at all. But, if he turned sharply as he was going out of the room, he would see her following him with her eyes. She was wondering, he knew, whether he was going to work, or to meet Estelle, or to think first of herself as he had done for so many years. For the first time within Felix's memory, Ma began to look at the advertisements of concerts in the daily papers, and to speak to him of any that were especially attractive. He knew that she was making a claim, not for herself, but as a counter-claim to one which she imagined might be made elsewhere. She was demanding his consideration as a diplomatic resource, and not as a selfishness. It was the most pathetic strategy, impossible to combat by the system which Felix had conceived with almost equal unconsciousness. It robbed him of the initiative. Instead of being pliable material, Ma was exerting her own great will, stronger than his own, and more pertinacious; weaker only because her hold upon Felix was in conflict with a powerful natural desire; weakened because she was less vivaciously ingenious in technical resources than he was. Nevertheless, the effects of her appeal to him were terrible.

"Hell and damnation," whispered Felix to himself one night, after a silent dinner. He found that the palms of

his hands were moist; and if there was one thing he disliked more than all others it was the moist palm. "Hell and damnation; I'm getting jumpy."

And with that reflection he took to his heels, left the house, and ran and ran in the direction of the Heath until he was breathless and in a free perspiration. Then he wiped the palms of his hands, and walked slowly into the unknown darkness of a spring evening, fanned by a damp and misty wind that was rising from the ground and wetting the young leaves of all the trees and bushes which stayed its upward course.

iv

Estelle came fairly often to the house—as though nothing were the matter. She would knock at the front door, and would be admitted—an enchanting picture of youth;—and would come into the living room to talk to Ma. Her assurance, which a man would have thought naïve and pretty, was to Ma an affront. She felt Estelle's hard eye everywhere, seeking domestic faults, insufferably patronising. And the two of them would be together in that warm blue room with the cream-coloured casement-curtains and brilliant carpet; and Ma would sit talking very quietly and with desperate self-possession, while Estelle gave half her attention carelessly and confidently to Ma (having youth upon her side, and the consciousness of charm), and half to the door through which Felix at any time might enter. When at last he came, her manner would change. She made no pretence of indifference—it would have been impossible,—but looked at him with that unguarded glance that expressed what was almost craving; while Ma, with a set face from which she had tried vainly to banish fear and disgust, would stare as quickly away. When Felix could break the

group, and be alone, or alone with one of them, he always breathed a heavy sigh of relief. For as long as they were all together he could feel his nerves twittering from strain.

Occasionally, since there was no other way of handling the situation, Felix took both Ma and Estelle to a concert or a theatre. But this proved a failure, and the scheme had to be abandoned. The last occasion was a visit to Covent Garden. The opera was "Tales of Hoffmann," to which, as everybody knows, there is an epilogue which is practically a repetition of the prologue. All three knew the opera well, from having heard it several times; but to Ma an opera was such a delight that every bar of the music was unstaled by the number of times she had heard it. To Estelle there was no such romantic interest in any public entertainment, since she was used to every form of social distraction. Before the epilogue began, therefore, Estelle mechanically and silently began to draw on her overcoat—they were in the upper circle,—with the idea of leaving immediately. Ma, hearing the light movements, looked sideways at Estelle, across Felix, with a new exasperated obstinacy. It was as though this girl assumed the leadership of any party! Almost, Ma uttered a sharp "Sh!" It was upon her lips. To her, at this tense moment of pleasure, movement was a desecration. Felix, unconscious of all this, but catching Estelle's action, and knowing that if they all went before the epilogue they would escape a crowd, which always made Ma extremely nervous, approved it. He accordingly whispered to Ma, very low:

"Let's go before the epilogue."

Ma, frowning, wounded, unhappy, desirous of hearing the last note of music upon this, one of her so rare excursions to the theatre, hesitated. Then, finally, shook her head.

"Let's go!" whispered Estelle to Ma, not having heard Felix's whisper. "Quick, before the curtain goes up."

"No. I want to hear the end," whispered Ma, in return. Her cheeks were deeply flushed. Her whisper had been bitter. It had been an antagonism. All the obstinacy of her nature was summed up in that hiss of indignant remonstrance. And then, to Felix's horror, there came an answering tremble in Estelle's whispered retort.

"Oh, very well. Please yourself."

Christ! What children! Estelle's parry had been so hostile, so rude, so much what a suburban girl who had been brought up with brothers might say, that he was ashamed of her. This was not his Estelle. That other had not been the Ma he knew. Such tired bickering was unjust to both. These two, whom he loved, snarling at each other with jealousy as though they were not the women he loved at all. It was intolerably the sign that their nerves were on edge, that his plan for their mutual understanding was a dream. They were enemies.

"It's so ridiculous! So *ridiculous!*" muttered Felix to himself; his own colour high for an instant with shame and anger. He could not keep still, for indignation and chagrin. He did not hear a note of the epilogue to "Tales of Hoffmann," and the others were both trembling too much to hear anything but the angry beating of their own hearts. They could not look at each other when the lights of the theatre were raised, but stood flushed and speechless while Felix pulled his coat from under the seat and put it on. Thereafter they walked in silence upon each side of him to the train, separated in the crowd and having to stand in the railway carriage, both distraught and for once incapable of the courtesies of decent breeding.

Felix alone, of the three, was able to talk; and Ma and Estelle listened sullenly, without once forcing a smile to

reward his painstaking sallies. Ma was ashamed, ashamed to have descended to anger, and ashamed at having put herself in the wrong; Estelle had the feelings of a younger person whose rights in a man have been infringed. There was a very cool leave-taking. Estelle wept half the night with anger; Ma did not sleep at all from self-reproach and despair; Felix, because he was so sick at heart, laughed with exasperation as he lay in bed, and then groaned and exclaimed and was maddened and filled with tempestuous ridicule for several hours, until at last, worn out, he dropped asleep. And in his dreams it appeared that Aunt Julie had come back sevenfold, and was saying "Oh" from seven hideous mouths, which so alarmed him that he woke again shuddering from head to foot.

That was the last time a party of three ever went from this house to the theatre.

V

The following day was a Saturday; and in the afternoon Felix went out walking with Jacob, whom he had not seen for a couple of weeks. There had been a heavy frost in the night, and the air was still crisp with it; but the hedges were just showing green, and altogether the atmosphere was one of hope. That was an inspiration much needed by Felix, who this afternoon was heavy-eyed and heavy-hearted as the result of his recent defeat in tactics. He had found the mesmeric control of women beyond his powers, and he knew it. He had exchanged very few words with Ma at breakfast, and was timid of her; he was to see Estelle upon the morrow, and he was in actual alarm at the prospect.

Old Jacob was plodding with his usual hunched laboriousness, and Felix, filled with self-pity, was walking beside him. They did not speak, but pondered much. The

hedges were tall upon both sides of the lane, raised upon banks; and the walkers could see nothing beyond them but further hedges and the lane indefinitely continued. Felix felt himself hemmed in. It was becoming a favourite simile of his, that he was a beetle in a trap; and the hedges made him shrink.

"Damn these hedges!" he muttered at last. "Jacob, I've got claustrophobia."

"Have you?" answered Jacob, paying no attention to what Felix said. "That's fine."

Felix pulled himself together with a jerk. Was it he who was mad? Or was it Jacob? There seemed no comfort in this demented and uncharitable world.

"Hey!" he shouted, observing truly that Jacob was not in his right mind. "What's up?"

Jacob turned a wandering eye upon his friend. That homely brown face was most likable when Jacob smiled, for his smile could be very sweet. He smiled now, and Felix was reassured. But Jacob was still in doubt as to his fault.

"Did I say something wrong, then?" he questioned.

"You've got something on your mind, you old rascal!" cried Felix accusingly. "Some putrid miasma, I suppose."

Jacob smiled again. To Felix's astonishment he could see that a kind of dull red was rising to Jacob's face. He was appalled.

"Well, yes," said Jacob. "I've got something on my mind, and I hardly like to tell you." Felix exhorted him. "The fact is, Felix, I'm married."

"You're *what*?" Felix staggered to the side of the road, against the bank, with his head among the changing twigs of the hedge.

"I'm married," repeated Jacob, pleased with the effect of his first announcement.

"Don't be absurd. You *can't* be!" cried Felix. "It's not right. I shall forbid the banns. You're not in a state to be *trusted* with a wife."

Jacob grinned now. He was glad to see that Felix approved his step.

"Well, that's another thing," he said, simply. "See, I've wanted her for a long time, and I worried about it a bit, thinking whether it would upset my work and all that, and if it would be fair to her to marry her and let her find out I wanted to carry on with my study. I mean, miasmas and marriage—they don't seem to mix." Felix demurred. "Well, *I* don't think they do," answered Jacob. I ought to tell you she's a working girl; she's been a waitress until last week. A tea-shop waitress; only she never kept *me* waiting. And she's one of the best. I don't care what you put her up against; she can tackle it. She's not one of these women who talk a lot and—you know what I mean, Felix: these brainy women."

"If you think the brainy woman is necessarily talkative," remarked Felix, "you're wrong."

Jacob looked at him argumentatively.

"She talks a lot," he asserted. "Of *course* she does. Any brainy woman. I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, no," explained Felix. "She's just got brains. You only *think* she's talking."

"But she *does* talk," protested Jacob. "That hard, rattling clever talk."

Felix pooh poohed the whole thing. He pitied Jacob.

"No, no, my good Jacob," he said, insufferably. "If a woman's got brains they seem to rattle about in her head. She can't let you forget them. She hardly opens her mouth. It's all your imagination."

"Don't be silly. Now, d'you want to hear about Letty, or not?"

The sternness of Jacob's threat produced its instant

effect. Felix heard all that Jacob knew about his wife's character and virtues. She was dark, was true, was uneducated, was a worker, had brothers and sisters by the dozen, was plain and helpful and sturdy; and she had consented to read a compendium called "Modern Socialism," edited by Mr. R. C. K. Ensor, so that she might change her political faith, much as a royal person will change religions in making an advantageous marriage. It all sounded to Felix most unattractive. He eyed the solidly satisfied Jacob with some fastidiousness; and there was no mistaking his character and his quality. Jacob was a man. Not, Felix felt, a mere bubble of triviality, like himself. It was evident that Jacob had chosen his wife with care, that he had chosen her wisely, after much inward debating of pros and cons. That was the final impression made upon Felix. It obliterated all others for the moment.

"The extraordinary thing to me," Felix said, "which, knowing you, I ought to have known, is that you're one of the men who deliberately *choose* their wives!"

He was lost in amazement. It might almost have been Jacob's epitaph: "He chose his wife." Felix felt in a flash that his belief in Jacob's mid-Victorianism was strangely confirmed. Thus did the Victorians act. Not so Felix. To him the action would have been an impossible one. Nevertheless, there was something to be said for it, unless the method of the Victorian age could be held responsible for the vagary of the Georgian. It made him wonder, at any rate, whether his own theory of love and marriage, which was so much more romantic, was quite sound. The consequences of it, certainly, made him at this moment sick with anxiety as to the outcome. If he could not dominate both Ma and Estelle (and he had very little illusion left as to his power), which must he choose? Choice was imperative. He was shaken by a tremor.

vi

During that whole afternoon they spoke of nothing but Letty and Jacob's ideas of matrimony and social work. Jacob thought his marriage would bring him into closer touch with the proletariat. He gravely fingered the proletariat in his mind, and discoursed upon the proletarian mentality until Felix shrieked in self-defence. Felix cared nothing for anything that was generalised. He could not follow analyses of the herd, the middle-classes, textile-workers, landlords. To him there were no such things, but only individuals in a kicking mess of egotism and prejudice. To Jacob a class known as "the employers" represented a reality. To Felix it appeared that Jacob's ideas upon marriage were upon the same plane of reality as his ideas upon the proletariat and upon the employers.

"It's *all* muck," he told Jacob. "All muck. There's no such entity as the proletariat. You're competent to write about miasmas, my old Jacob; you live in 'em." And then, as they approached the cottage towards dusk, he added (perhaps with a sudden clutch at Jacob's protection): "Better come in with me. We'll have some supper and a game of chess, and I'll show you how much clearer my plutocratic head is than your proletarian one."

They went into the house. It was perfectly still. It might have been empty.

"Like a wash?" Felix asked. Jacob ascended with him to the bathroom; and while Jacob was splashing water all over the floor in washing his face Felix slipped downstairs to look for Ma. He opened the living-room door. To his surprise the fire was almost out. Only a few derelict husks of coal stood like a ruin among a mass of dulling red. The room seemed in the twilight to be empty. It was quite grey, and full of shadows and loneliness. Elsie

would by this time have gone home, and Ma must be out. Felix was withdrawing, when he heard a faint sound, like a low groan. He stopped, looked round the room, his heart constricted with sudden fear. And there, at the other end of the room, clinging to the seat of a chair, but otherwise lying upon the floor, was Ma. With a cry of horror, Felix ran forward.

Ma half lay, half sat, upon the floor, her face ashen, her hair tumbled. Her lips were quite blue. She was supported by one of the ordinary chairs, her head resting heavily against its seat, and her fingers clutching the spokes of its back. Felix hurried across the room, himself suddenly breathless at this sight, which made him so apprehensive. Gently, trembling as he did so, he knelt by her side, and released the desperate hands by which she had saved herself in falling. She was sensible, but no more.

"Jacob," called Felix. "Jacob. Quick!" He heard jumping steps down the stairs, and then a sound of shocked amazement. "Get some brandy," he cried. "None in the house. Have to run into the High Street. But first help me to lift her on to the sofa here."

They lifted Ma, and as she was laid upon the sofa she opened her eyes.

"Oh," she groaned. "Oh, I'm so sorry . . . so sorry to be an old nuisance."

"Never mind that," said Felix, briskly. "Cut along, Jacob."

Jacob was gone in an instant, while Felix chafed Ma's cold hands. Every now and then she gave a faint, breathless groan, and rolled her head; but he saw her trying to smile reassuringly.

"So . . . sorry," she murmured, in groaning.

"Jacob's gone for brandy. Soon have you all right," cried Felix, in a raised voice, as though, in his panic, he

fancied she was deaf. "Don't try to talk. How d'you feel? - Better?"

She nodded. Then gave another slow, uncontrollable groan. He heard the word "nuisance" draggingly repeated.

"*Not* a nuisance!" he contradicted. "Ill. Left alone. Soon have you all right." Ma nodded again; and Felix, suddenly impatient for Jacob's return, left her for a moment in order to get a couple of glasses and some water. "Here, try this!" he commanded. Holding her head up he put the glass of water to Ma's lips, and she swallowed a little of the water; although to the sympathetic disgust of Felix more of it trickled over her cheeks and under her chin to the sofa. But at this instant Jacob returned with the brandy; and with his help Ma was restored to complete consciousness.

"What a silly old thing . . ." she murmured, feebly full of contrition. "I felt so . . . funny . . . I'm not like this as a rule. I found myself falling . . . fainting . . . I'm so very . . . sorry . . . to frighten you. Poor old chap . . . so . . ."

For Felix there came a memory so dim that he could not explain it, of another time years ago when Ma had been ill, when she had been sorry for the trouble and alarm she was causing. He was stricken with such horror at her suffering, at her inability to think of her own pain, that tears stood in his eyes.

"Now," said he, with a laughing peremptoriness. "You're going to bed. Jacob and I are going to help you upstairs, and Jacob's going to get a doctor while you get to bed."

"Oh, not a doctor . . ." protested Ma, still feebly. "I'm . . . quite well."

"A doctor. Make yourself useful, Jacob," said Felix.

vii

Later, when the doctor had been and when Jacob had gone, Felix went up to Ma's bedroom, to find her lying awake and very much better. Colour had returned to her cheeks. She looked almost rosy, with her dark hair, which was no longer abundant as it had been in older days, resting free upon the pillow. To Felix's anxious and amused eye Ma was exactly like a child. She was gentle, was docile, and when she raised her head from the pillow in order to see what he carried, her naïve astonishment made him laugh.

"What's *that?*?" demanded Ma.

"Medicine."

"Ugh."

"Also, by doctor's orders, a little food."

"Who prepared it?"

"I did."

"Oh, Felix!" She struggled higher in the bed, looking younger than ever; and eyed the small repast which was upon the tray. Felix was rather pleased with his own housewifeliness. He had found a white napkin with a quaint blue striping upon it, and had draped the tray. A glass of wine was the right hand colour effect; the medicine balanced it upon the left hand side; in the middle distance, as it were, could be seen a small and attractive clump of salt, pepper, and mustard pots in white china; in the foreground, the *pièce de résistance*, was a plate with an almost circular vegetable-dish cover protecting the prepared meal of boiled fish from the icy winds of the staircase.

"The mustard is there for the composition's sake," explained Felix. He stood by the side of the bed, hovering, in the manner of Aunt Julie; until Ma, choking, bade him be sensible; after which he retired to a suitable dis-

tance. It would be necessary, he knew, for some explanations and apologies to be made in the morning to Elsie; but Ma need not be troubled with these things. "And the doctor says you may stay in bed tomorrow," explained Felix.

"I shan't."

"Well, we don't want a repetition of this affair."

"No. There won't be. I was tired. I hadn't had anything to eat. This fish is delicious."

"He said you were just a little run down."

"That's all," agreed Ma. She went on eating her fish, because Felix had prepared it; and drank her glass of wine because it had been Felix's thought which had led to its appearance. After which she lay back, and relinquished the tray. They talked a little more. Felix picked up the tray.

"Now go to sleep," he said. "I'm going to have some supper, and a pipe, and then I'm going to bed. I'm tired, too. I'll look in on my way up."

With some constraint, he lifted the medicine glass and left it upon the small table at the head of the bed, and was proceeding to the door when Ma, upon a fierce impulse, cried:

"Felix!" His heart sank. He knew that their secret was to be broached. He had known it from the moment that he came into the room. He was ready to stop her. This pale grey room, with the curtains drawn, made Ma appear so peculiarly and transcendently the mother he had always known that he shrank with a sensitiveness which was almost unbearable from any possibility of conflict at this time. Yet he was resolute. He stood patiently with the tray in his hand. "Felix, I'm very sorry to have given you such a shock this evening."

"Yes, Ma," said Felix. "Go to sleep."

"Be quiet. And I'm sorry I was so bad-tempered last night."

Felix grasped at what might be a possibility of salvaging the relationship between Ma and Estelle.

"Oh, that was nothing," he said, eagerly. "You see, we were both thinking of you and the crowd afterwards. That was all. It was quite all right."

Ma lay perfectly still in bed, and there was a glow of returned health in her cheeks which was reassuring.

"Yes," she said drily—doubtfully. "*You* may have been."

"And Estelle," he urged. "Really, you misjudge her." There was a pause. Felix once more spoke. "Now don't think any more about it. Go to sleep. I've asked Estelle to come to tea tomorrow, and we'll all be happy together."

"Asked Estelle to tea?" repeated Ma. "But why?"

"Because I was seeing her tomorrow; and I had to send a message to say I couldn't come."

A curious note crept into Ma's voice.

"Oh, Felix," she said. "I'm really all right." In an instant she continued: "But even if I'd been ill, surely that would have been enough—you could have put off meeting Estelle till some other day." There was a strain, a resentment in her tone. Felix's eyes closed for an instant. His heart was beating faster.

"I had to send a counter invitation," he said. "Don't you worry about it, though. If you're not well enough, you needn't see her."

"It's as though——" began Ma, and stopped. "No, don't go, Felix. I've been rather anxious about you——"

"I know you have," answered Felix, almost drily. He came back into the room and closed the door, setting the tray down upon the chest-of-drawers. There was tension in the air, intolerable tension that must once and for ever

be removed. "I ought to have spoken to you before. Estelle——"

Ma had moved again. She was now lying on her side, facing him, and he saw that she fumbled with the bed-clothes, pulling them up over her shoulders or down from her ear, with unsteady hands. Her hands would not keep still. She herself could not keep still. Her voice, husky and breathless, sent a shock through Felix.

"You're not thinking of marrying Estelle," cried Ma, as though that were a supposition so absurd that it might immediately be cleared away. He did not answer; and Ma, having begun, proceeded in her strained, unsteady voice of agitation: "I've been dreading that you . . . For weeks I've been dreading that you might be thinking of marriage. It isn't marriage itself; nothing would make me happier than to see you married."

"What's your objection, then?" demanded Felix. His eyes were dark; he was angry; but he loved Ma. Lying there, she was tragically simple. His throat was dry.

"Felix, she's not—not the wife for you." Ma could hardly pronounce the words distinctly. She was shaking.

"I think you're wrong," he said, coldly. "We're going to be married."

"Oh, *no!*" It was a groan. There was a long silence. Both stared at nothing. They could think of nothing to say. The silence became a torture.

"Haven't you seen how happy we both are when we're together?" Felix asked, very low.

"I hoped it wasn't so. Oh, Felix! It's wrong. It's a mistake." She spoke with the fierceness of despair. "You *can't* know what you're doing."

"Don't let's talk about it." That was unavailing, as Felix well knew. "I'm so afraid of making you ill again."

"No, you won't make me ill." Ma was silent. She could not cry; her anguish was too deep for tears. "Ever

since you were a little boy I've thought of your growing up and having a wife that I could love as a daughter. It's been a sort of delight to think of it. But Estelle——" She broke off. A shudder which she could not control ran through her body. Felix was appalled.

"I don't understand," he stammered. "She loves me. You couldn't ask more than that. It's not as though . . . Oh, Ma; you know that I'd give anything—anything but this—to please you, and make you happy. It's so wretched that just this one thing I *can't* do. I want you both. I want to keep you always, and to bring Estelle into our partnership——"

"You could never do that," said Ma, swiftly.

"But she loves me."

"Perhaps she loves you—in her way." It was remorseless.

"It's the way I want."

Ma turned upon him. Into her face leapt sudden doubt and contempt. And at last, after such scrutiny:

"I don't believe it," she said.

Felix was puzzled at her tone, at her disbelief. He shrugged his shoulders, not in disdain, but in a kind of desperate bewilderment.

"I don't understand you." He was at a loss.

Ma tried to control the trembling of her voice. She moved her hand over the bedclothes, smoothing them once again away from her ear.

"Listen, Felix," she said. "You don't know how much better you are than the ordinary run of men. You're so different from them that you can't realise the difference. You give so easily that you don't know you are giving, and all sorts of things aren't in your mind that are in other minds because of the nobility that keeps you——"

"But Ma, that's so ridiculous," pleaded Felix. "Grant that you think I'm these things; Mrs. Ferguson probably

thinks the same of Estelle. And you want me to be happy, don't you. I know it. Well, I think this will make me happy."

Ma shook her head.

"Impossible," she said, huskily. "Impossible."

"I'm sure you're wrong. I don't even see what you dislike in Estelle. She's pretty, she's charming; she's very fond of me. She's intelligent and kind. And I love her, which is the main thing. D'you know, I've loved her since I was a little boy."

"You're only a little boy now," said Ma, sadly.

"Oh, come!" He was suddenly impatient. There was no reply. Felix picked up the tray again. This was to bring the fruitless talk to an end. "You won't be cruel to her," he begged.

"I?" Ma was startled. "My dear Felix; it'll be she who'll be cruel to me. Cruel because she can't help herself. Can't you see that she's jealous of all understanding between you and me?"

"Nonsense!" cried Felix, trying to pretend that he could laugh, and failing.

"Felix. Look at the way she's behaved to me—to Aunt Julie. To Aunt Julie with obvious rudeness—because you didn't like her. To me with care, with hard rudeness that's masked as consideration—because she knows what chums we've been; and won't risk alienating you until she's safe. My dear generous boy, you couldn't understand, because it's not in your nature."

"Don't let's talk——" Felix was almost beside himself with distress. "Look, I'm going."

"There's something more I must say. She'll be jealous of anything and anybody——"

"I'm going."

"She'll wear you out," cried Ma, staying him. "She'll make every demand upon you that a woman can make

upon the man she marries. She doesn't plan it. It's in her blood. She'll sap your energy and your courage. She'll exhaust your nerves and your body with her demands. It's in her blood. It's in her blood. It's in the blood of her brothers. Look at them! What have you seen there? She hasn't escaped. She couldn't escape. Felix, can't you *feel* that she'll be . . . *insatiable?*"

They stared at each other for a moment, and then Felix went slowly out of the room, leaving Ma shuddering. He was spent. His vitality was gone. Only bitter exhaustion remained, bitter exhaustion and an unhappiness that was like despair and death itself.

PART FOUR: THE HUSBAND

CHAPTER XVII: THE FIRST YEAR

i

MR. AND MRS. FELIX HUNTER lived in a small house at Highgate not five minutes from the cottage in which Ma continued to stay alone with her heartache. It was a house close to others, and had no privacy, because the walls were not thick enough to exclude sounds from the house next door. Each room was square and small, as if the builder had only been allowed a definite number of bricks and had been afraid that there would not be enough to go round. But the rooms were all furnished so as to be backgrounds for Estelle's fairness and delicate beauty. They were her fit setting—tiny, full of pure colour. In spite of his success, however, as a scenic artist, Felix was not fond of his new home. It was smaller by far than the older cottage, and it was like a scene in a supermarionette theatre. He did not think Estelle a doll, and it irked him that she should be cabined in small rooms when she would have seemed a jewel in a mansion. For him the one point in the house's favour was that in the long garden there was a wooden building which he used as a studio. Here were all his stores of material, his easel, his old drawings, and almost everything that he prized. It was more homely than his home, and better loved, although the house had one irresistible claim upon his regard. It was that his wife lived in it. He was as much as ever in love with his wife after a beautiful summer which they had spent together in the most delicious happiness.

Felix had had one shock—two shocks—any number of shocks—upon his honeymoon. The first occurred when they were in the train upon their way to the New Forest. They had both been so exhilarated and full of excited joy that the journey had been unmarked. And as they reached the Hampshire borders Estelle began for the first time to espy the names of passing stations and to speculate as to distances. Felix lay idly back and watched the flying country with a meditative interest. There was only one blemish in his happiness. He recalled the agonised face of Ma as he had last seen it. She had been very brave, and had kept her nerve throughout; but for Felix the knowledge of her ordeal had been terrible. Even, he had been thankful to leave behind him that unwillingly betrayed grief. And as he now remembered it he sharply whispered to himself: "Poor old thing." It was his word of pity.

"What was that!" asked Estelle, inquisitively. Her head was back again upon his shoulder, and the slight tendrils of her hair in his eyes; and she had seen his lips move unconsciously.

"Nothing!" explained Felix, with tact.

"Secrets? *Now?* Tell me at once!" She pressed closer, a little girl in his arms. She was irresistible. Felix felt his heart softening, his pulses quickening. There was intoxication in this embrace, in the knowledge that he would forever embrace her.

"Just thinking of Ma," he said. "She's ill, you know."

"Well," whispered Estelle, fiercely. "She can't expect to keep you always."

"She doesn't. She's ill. She's a little on my conscience."

And then came the first shock. Estelle heard his words and answered them with a sort of hard cruelty. But it was not the cruelty that struck Felix.

"Women at her age always *are* ill. She'll get over it. It's her time of life."

Ho! It impressed Felix deeply. So in the last resort women were always preoccupied with sex. It had been so with Ma, in her warning; it was equally so now with Estelle. Time of life—insatiable demands—would a man so surely have found a sexual explanation? Felix believed not. And it is possible to have a general assumption regarding women as a sex, and still to receive a jar when the trait is exemplified by one's nearest and dearest. Felix, who was spasmodic in his sexual preoccupations, admitted the greater realism of women; he was not shocked; but he was silenced. He had not ceased to learn from reality.

"However," said he, not to be outdone in coarseness upon his wedding day. "When we have a baby, we shall find her sprouting as a grandmother, and as happy as a peach."

"Are peaches happy?" demanded Estelle. And then, lower: "Felix . . . er . . . D'you mind if we don't have a baby at all? I don't want a baby."

"What!" cried Felix. "I thought every woman wanted a baby."

"Well, *I* don't. Felix!" He was staggered, and could make no reply. Estelle's tone changed to one of entreaty: "Felix; are you angry?"

"To tell you the truth, my pet," he replied, "I rather counted on the baby as a cure for Ma. But, however, the cure will wait. Did you mean 'never'? Am I not to have anybody to train?"

"There's *me*," she hinted. "You are funny, Felix. As if I was to have all that pain and trouble just to please your mother." She kissed him, forcing his face gently down until their lips met, until under her caress Felix

was resolved once more into a bridegroom absorbed in his bride.

Felix was like the heir of Ravenswood, whose motto is one of the most sinister in the world. He bided his time. If Estelle had will, there might also be some life in the will of her husband. But he did not mention this. Time works strange changes.

ii

He had been secretly amazed, also, at Estelle's rapturous abandonment to the marital relation. Felix had always read that women were shy, that they were cold, and that they acquiesced reluctantly in the transports of their lovers. His experience was to the contrary. Estelle was entrancingly not shy; she was instinctively the mistress of all the arts of cajolery. She loved him with ardour as great as his own. And Felix made one astonishing discovery, which was that while he regarded sex as a humorous thing, hedged about with ridiculous inconveniences and follies, Estelle was desperately and seriously absorbed in it. To her a joke upon the subject of sex was a profanation.

"Oh, but my dear," cried Felix, stirred to protest. "If you exalt passion above everything else, it becomes a merely repulsive mania."

"Repulsive. Beautiful," she retorted. "I don't care what you say."

Felix shook his head. Estelle nodded hers, more vigorously. She was intent. And so Felix argued, not as gravely perhaps as the words might suggest.

"Imagine passion on one side only." That made her, when she realised his meaning, shudder. "Exactly," continued Felix, well pleased with the success of his appeal. "What's beautiful is the common *love*. Take

love away, and it's like emptying the coloured water out of the chemist's bottles. Passion's a high-sounding name used to shame the prigs. It's a fine word for an appetite. People talk of love and passion as synonymous. It's like their sauce. What do they know of love who only passion know?"

"All the same," said Estelle; "I don't agree with you."

Her lips were parted. Felix, looking at the parted lips and the delicate fair skin and the forget-me-not eyes drowning in voluptuousness, remembered Ma's vehement warning. He was once more appalled at Ma's inexhaustible depths of knowledge.

"What an old devil she is!" he said to himself; and became thoughtful.

"Now you're angry!" exclaimed Estelle, after a pause.

Felix fixed his eyes, full of laughing love, upon her. What nonsense she allowed herself to think! Didn't she know yet that he didn't mean half he said? Wasn't she capable of ever knowing him?

"Old silly," said Felix, kissing her. He was still astounded at the softness of her cheeks. It was warm and soft and delicious, like a peach newly plucked. "I adore you."

"Really?" That was all Estelle cared about. If she were loved by Felix her day was a delight. She dreamed in his arms, like a wakeful baby which has not yet begun to think of its misfortunes with the natural hypochondria of childhood.

iii

Estelle had been born in Holloway, and she had lived in Holloway all her life. She was the youngest child of her parents. She had been taught nothing by her father and mother, but had been to a day school with other girls, and had learned to play the piano, to draw, to

speak French, to sew and knit, to spell, and to do simple arithmetic. At the age of twelve she had first begun to attract her father's notice; and from that time onward she had been in his eyes the jewel of the family. With unusual intelligence, she had grasped everything quickly; and not least quickly had she grasped the value of her father's love. It had helped thus to form her character.

Felix, having learned some of her beauty and charm before marriage, began to learn her character afterwards, which is the natural method of the young man in love. He began his education at once, because Estelle had in her nature considerable frankness and honesty, as well as much that was overlaid with reserve. Felix found her a strange mixture: she was almost as strange a mixture as he was himself. He was charmed at what he took to be Estelle's unconventionality. He thanked God that he had not married a conventional girl. Estelle therefore surprised him one day when she said:

"Funny, I'm the one who's conventional, trying to be unconventional. Whereas you're *really* unconventional, trying hard to be conventional."

Whether this was true or not, it pleased Felix. It seemed to him to be the mark of either profundity or humility; and as he had not recently observed these traits in Estelle he was ready to welcome them separately or both together. More: he committed himself to the proposition: "Only the humble are profound." As to the question of his own conventionality or unconventionality, Felix did not care either way. He wanted her to love him; but he did not mind what she thought of him. He was less pleased, nevertheless, upon another occasion, when Estelle, considering deeply her favoured subject, said suddenly:

"You know, if you weren't very nice indeed, you'd be *horrible*."

"Ah," retorted Felix, wounded. "It might be said of anybody."

But it showed that, even in the early days, they were thinking a good deal about each other, and thinking critically.

iv

In their box of a home there were six small rooms. The smallest of them was used for a still smaller maid-servant. When Felix heard that a human being was to sleep in this room he protested.

"Good God!" he cried. "You're not going to put somebody in here!"

"Of course . . . It's only a maid. I *must* have a maid, Felix."

"But she'll stifle!"

"Get along with you. It would hold a double bed. But we only want one."

"One what?" asked Felix. His ears were boxed. This was Estelle's department, he found, and humanity such as he possessed was an encumbrance. All the same, he fortunately was able to persuade Estelle that as an artist he must superintend the decoration of the house. He himself, at the top of a ladder, painted a dado round the lobby upon which the front door opened. He would not afterwards have painted a dado anywhere else for any reward whatever. Painting at the top of a ladder is very difficult. However, when the subject of the design had been explained to callers by a proud and eager Estelle the dado in the lobby was much admired. Felix passed from the lobby to the other walls, but here he decided only what papers or distempers were to be used. He and Estelle chose the furniture together. They were aided by a wedding present in advance, from Mr. Ferguson, of

two hundred and fifty pounds. They had few disagreements over the furniture. The house, in fact, was the result of unusual harmony of taste, and if it was a taste which Felix outgrew in later years it was appropriate to the time of his marriage.

There followed work in the studio. It was his own room, and he did with it what he pleased. The walls were papered brown; a north light and a skylight were arranged; and here Felix proposed to dwell in happiness and to work with energy. It was a dream. The awakening will be shown.

Mrs. Ferguson gave them a picture of an angel which was so indecent that they burned the angel with rejoicings, and Felix used the frame for his own portrait of Estelle.

V

This portrait had been finished before their marriage. It was Felix's first serious work in oils, and it was not satisfactory. In the effort to avoid sentimentality, Felix had made his outlines hard and his colours cold. It looked an unemotional piece of work. Strange that this should have been so, when he had painted his own living and burning heart upon the canvas. When Jacob had insisted that "The Upper Deck" should be sent in for the New English, Estelle had urged that her portrait should also be sent. And "The Upper Deck" was accepted, and the portrait was not. It was a blow to Estelle; but to Felix the matter for surprise was rather that even "The Upper Deck" was to be shown. It had seemed an impossible dream. He and Estelle went upon the return from their honeymoon to the New English exhibition. They saw everything. At last they saw "The Upper Deck."

"There!" cried Estelle.

Felix looked ruefully at his obscure handywork, placed so high upon the wall as to be ruined.

"Um. It ought to have been called 'The Upper Berth,' " he remarked gloomily. And then, after an even more depressed approach and contemplation of the picture itself, he added: "or 'Still-birth' right away."

He had never been so ashamed. All the faults of his study were accentuated. They were such as to humiliate him. The drawing was constrained; the depth of tone had evaporated. To Felix "The Upper Deck" looked like one of those original wash drawings which used to be shown in the windows of "The Graphic." He could not bear to look at the shabby, mechanical thing, which ambition had now left so far behind.

"Well?" asked his wife.

"Rotten," said Felix. "Let's go. I can't stand it. It's dingy and cramped. And dessicated as well. Old-fashioned. All the life's out of it. Feeble." His heart had sunk. "*I'm not an artist!*" he groaned to himself. "Never will be. Blast!" He swallowed quickly. Everything was tasteless and devitalised. He was miserable. "Let's go and get drunk!" he demanded.

"What for?" said Estelle.

"Oh,—for joy," cried Felix, gaily.

vi

The studio was used very fitfully in those months. There seemed to be so much else to do that pictures were out of the question. Felix was making enough money at Brinksons to keep them both; his extra work for the minor periodicals was enough to pay for luxuries and for the half-share of Ma's maintenance. He was not pressed for money. Or so he thought. And when he discovered that Estelle dressed expensively he wondered

where the bills went for her frocks and hats and under-clothing.

"Don't you worry about that," said Estelle, suavely.

"D'you make them yourself?" naïvely inquired Felix.

She might have lied to him; but she did not. Instead, she drew his attention to details of her clothing which were such as to suggest even greater expensiveness.

"A man isn't expected to pay for such things in the first year of marriage," Estelle explained.

"But you haven't had——"

"I know. Well, anyway, Father pays. He's got plenty of money."

"Oh, but damn it, I can't have that, you know!" cried Felix in a fever. "D'you mean he's paying my bills?"

"Don't be silly." Estelle wriggled upon his knee.

"I'd rather he didn't." She saw that Felix was disturbed.

"You're angry," she said, quickly.

"Not angry. Irritated." There seemed to him a vital difference in the states. "Principally because I thought you *liked* being married to me." "So I do," interposed Estelle, breathlessly.—"Well, it's not a thing I care for—this letting your father pay for your clothes. You can go on doing it if you like; but I shan't have any answer if people say I sponge on him. See?"

"You're calling me disloyal!" she cried, sensitively. In a moment, as if with tears impending: "And so I am." There was a long pause before Estelle, thoroughly mistress of herself again, proceeded with the subject. "You know, you *are* a beast, Felix," she said, a little forlornly. "I hate you. I hate you and love you." She put her arms about his neck, and rubbed her cheek against his, inviting kisses with assurance. "Sometimes you exasperate me. You put me in the wrong."

"It's a gift," admitted Felix, graciously. But all the same he kissed with some contrition.

"Don't you *realise* that there's no getting away from you? You're so—" She sighed. "I never met a man like you. Never."

"Oh, my dear; that's dangerous," protested Felix, restless as ever under praise. "Every young woman has to think that of her beau. It's her own vanity. You'll wake up and find me out very soon. 'I am an artist who cannot paint'—ever read that? It's in some bit of 'Pippa's Passes,' I think. And that reminds me: I've done no work since we've been married. Real work, I mean. I haven't wanted to."

"And now you're tired of me," breathed Estelle, "you want to work." She clung more tightly to him. "I knew you'd get tired of me. Knew it." And because he did not answer she fearfully turned his face with her hands and looked deep into his eyes to see if what she had said was true. And when their glances met her own eyes were still full with that dark hunger that he had always seen there. She kissed him upon the cheek, and then, almost ravenously, brought her lips to his mouth. "D'you love me still?" she whispered. "Love me ever so much? Or want to leave me? . . ." Only after a long pause did she complete what had been in her mind. "If you want to work, and want to make love to me, you're in a mess, Felix."

"I am," he agreed.

Slowly, almost draggingly, as though she did not want to admit something distasteful, Estelle said:

"I'm jealous of your work." More briskly, she added: "But I'm not going to lose you because of that."

"Lose me?" Felix pretended to be bewildered. Estelle nodded sagaciously.

"Yes. I've read so much about girls who married

artists. They always interfere with their work and lose them. Silly cats."

He slapped her.

"You haven't married an artist!" cried Felix. "Make no mistake about that. You've married——"

"Well, what?" she pressed.

Felix had an inspiration.

"The greatest dress-designer in England!" he announced. "The supreme one."

Estelle clapped her hands. She then held him very close, with the hug a mother gives to a baby.

"You devil!" she whispered. "I see through you."

"You shall look through my designs," said Felix, superbly.

vii

Their real trouble showed otherwise. Felix was in the habit of calling each evening on his way home to see Ma. In this way he salved his conscience; in this way he preserved Ma's life, which would otherwise have sunk into lethargy. He never stayed with her more than a few minutes; but by his visit he roused her dullness to interest and gave her happy thoughts for wakefulness and thereafter pleasant dreams. And one night he found Ma seriously unwell, with only Elsie (now continuously in the house) in attendance. Ma lay in bed, flushed and with a sore throat, stricken with influenza. It was easy for Felix to take command, to send Elsie for the doctor, to await her return, and to promise another visit later in the evening; but he was delayed by all these good deeds, and he reached home half-an-hour late.

The band-box house was silent as he entered it. The dado frowned down upon him. He might almost have painted it as a reflection of his mistress's moods. Everything, for Felix, was ominous. And in the sitting-room,

dressed brilliantly in a gown of his devising, sat Estelle. She was a gorgeous spot amid furnishings and walls of grey and black; and she elaborately read a woman's magazine. One glance showed that she was in a state of resentment. Extraordinary how a frown changed that tiny face and made it sullen. Her eyes were bitter, her little mouth set.

"Sorry, old girl!" cried Felix, upon entering. It was bravado. He saw her flinch from his kiss. He touched no more than her chin. He was afraid; but he could not risk showing his fear, because fear betrayed would mean a prolongation of Estelle's mood for the whole evening. And so Felix remained apparently calm.

"It's all right. I know where you've been," said Estelle, impatiently.

Felix, like lightning, had divined her weakness, and was prepared to deal with it. He did this by suave unconsciousness.

"The poor old thing's ill," he explained coolly. "Elsie hadn't been able to run out for the doctor until I arrived. I wish you'd go down and see her tomorrow if you can manage it."

"I shan't," cried Estelle, trembling. And when Felix looked at her with smiling love, she choked as she said: "I won't."

"Oh, but that *would* be unkind," he protested gently.

"I don't care. I won't."

"I didn't promise you'd go," answered Felix. "But I hoped you would. I should awfully like you to go."

Estelle made no reply. She stood with one hand upon the mantelpiece, looking down into the empty grate. Her frown was unmistakable. Her coldness was in itself chilling. Felix trembled, because he loved her; but he was angry. Also, perhaps, he knew that anybody who feels that she has been obstinate feels also that she has

been wrong; and for that pain only gentleness is the cure. They went in to dinner thus disjoined. During the whole meal Estelle was speechless; and when Felix made his first tentative efforts to recover peace for the evening her expression was one of such ostentatious boredom that he knew the time was not yet. Their little cat-footed maid, so inhuman and unlike Elsie, crept in and out of the room. The effect of her silence was this evening uncanny. "All right, my girl," Felix said at last, grimly, to himself.

After dinner they went back into the sitting-room, and Estelle picked up her magazine again. Felix knelt down suddenly beside her.

"No!" cried Estelle, angrily, as he took her hands. He would not withdraw.

"You're being naughty. Aren't you well? Dress looks splendid."

"I don't like it," said Estelle, her chin out. Felix felt her tremble slightly. There was disdain, distaste in her eyes, and her body was rigid against his approach.

"Then you are *ill*. Show me your tongue." Felix kissed her hands.

"Get up: there's Kate with the coffee." What sharp ears she had! Felix had heard nothing. But her tone, though hostile, had been less stubborn. She was softening. Over their coffee cups they surveyed each other.

"If you'd think a little less of Ma and a little more of me . . ." said Estelle, in a reflective tone.

"If you'd love me a little more," countered Felix, mischievously. But his heart leapt with relief at the knowledge that this was the end of the battle. "What's the matter with the dress? I only noticed it was undone at the back."

"Where! What d'you mean?" cried Estelle.

The victory was for the moment to Felix. But within,

in his heart, he was sore—as sore as Estelle. He was also impatient because life did not seem long enough for these scenes of divergence and reconciliation. It appeared that in a perverse way Estelle enjoyed them. They were for her a prelude to love-making and the sweet secret-sharing that made Felix so indubitably her own. And he had also presently to break to her the news that he must go back to the other cottage, to hear the doctor's report.

"What would you say . . ." said Felix. "To a short walk?"

"Oh, no," flashed Estelle in what she would have wished should be a withering reply. "I know you want to go and see your mother." And when she had said that she could not resist a peep at him to see if her ironic calmness had taken effect.

"We could both go . . ." hinted Felix. "How nice it would be."

Estelle looked him in the eye. She tried to remain bitter, but she could not do so. She smiled against her will, with resentment, with the sense of having been overcome by a personality stronger than her own. Yet Felix had willed nothing; he had hoped. And he was not happy in the knowledge that he had power to dominate her. He did not want to dominate; he wanted to live in amity.

"Do my frock up," she commanded. "And don't stand there grinning like an ape."

CHAPTER XVIII: THE SECOND YEAR

i

ONE evening at the beginning of the following winter, when he had been married for eighteen months, Felix left the office rather late and as usual called at Ma's cottage on his way home. He found Godfrey there—Godfrey grown into a tall and substantial fellow in the early thirties with a blue chin and ample throat, with the superb and ingratiating carriage peculiar to his profession. Godfrey was a splendid figure, beautifully dressed and well cared for to the last detail of outfit. He converted the blue living-room with the cream curtains into a stage—and a stage as vast as the banqueting hall of a palace. There was air about him. And there was another magnificent thing also, which rejoiced Felix's heart whenever the brothers met. With all his splendour, and all that graciousness of manner which belongs properly to the stage, Godfrey had a delightful twinkling amusement at his own ways. He enjoyed the spectacle of himself. This complacent relish had come with success. Godfrey was one of those sensitive and self-conscious persons who demand applause, and the rather ironic attitude of his family had always driven him elsewhere for admiration. In a clever family of English people, where there is a tradition of concealed family pride, this is often found, and the snubbed genius is a common martyr. But Godfrey had been successful, and the successful can forgive much. Moreover, he had naturally a humour which was much more comic and exaggerated

than that of Felix, much less refined and obscure and pervasive. It was more obvious, and also it was richer in example. Godfrey had broadened and loosened in knocking about the country with all sorts of men and women, in bars and dressing-rooms, agents' offices, and the wings. He was popular and agreeably vain. His mind was still much limited by the theatre; his judgment was less acid than Felix's; he read plays only in order to see whether they contained parts for himself, and was capable of thinking that a good acting play was great drama; but he was not a fool. The day of his absorption in jargon was past. He was more experienced. And he was now engaged in what is called the legitimate. In other words he had begun to feel his way towards the West End of London, and at his age that was a mark of character as well as of naïve talent.

"Ah," said Godfrey, as Felix entered the cottage. He advanced like a foreign diplomat (in a play), his hand outstretched, putting Felix, as it were, at ease, as a monarch might have done. "I was hoping you'd arrive while I was here."

"Are you resting, then?" demanded Felix, unimpressed.

"No," came Godfrey's deep and vibrant voice. He beamed. "No. I'm rehearsing. We open next Thursday. It's the goods, Felix. We shall have a great and glorious run. Unfortunately my own part is a negligible affair. I play a secondary villain. But exquisitely villainous . . . I shall curdle the blood . . . It's a sort of Don John part . . . But I wanted to see you . . ." he paused gravely. ". . . about something else."

He was so elaborate that Felix was amused.

"Crime?" he asked.

"No," said Godfrey, gravely. "Not crime. Though it may involve murder."

"Oh, Godfrey!" cried Ma, apprehensively. Godfrey turned to her with profound courtesy.

"Not even *that* kind of murder," he explained. His manner was that of a stage doctor saying "dear lady." And then, quite swiftly, his tone dropped to that of ordinary eager boyishness. "The point is this, Felix. I want to put on a show of my own. I wanted to see you about it. It's a one-act play—very strong. Only three characters. And the idea is to put it on as a curtain-raiser in front of 'The Marmaduke Affair.' Now Sylvia is willing to let me do it: she likes the play, and as I've only got a small part in 'Marmaduke' she's ready to do the right thing. She believes in me . . . But I wanted a special kind of Set. I thought you'd design it for me. Quite simple."

Felix's eyes sparkled. If he had looked rather jaded upon his arrival he was now all afire.

"Rather!" he cried.

"Who's Sylvia?" asked Ma. She was sitting hunched in a chair, not very well, as they could both see, but absorbed in the rare sight of her two sons together. Her eyes rested first upon one and then upon the other, and her expressions as she gazed were so quick and so extreme in their variety that if the brothers had been observing her with similar intentness they would have learned a great deal, not only about Ma's love for them, but also, professionally, about the possibilities of facial play. Ma had nothing to think of except her two boys. Apart from them she had no life at all. It is the inevitable reward of a lifetime of self-effacement. And while she looked with pride and complacency, in which amusement had its share, at Godfrey, there crept into her face an almost timid anxiety when she watched Felix. He was older, more thoughtful and reserved than he had been; and Ma was shocked—confirmed in suspicion—when she

noticed how his face brightened at Godfrey's news. Her eyes closed for an instant in tragic pain. And then another thought drove this one from her mind.

"Who's Sylvia?" asked Ma.

"That all our swains commend her!" sang Felix, grinning.

They both explained that Sylvia was Sylvia Langridge, a leading actress, who was starring in London, and in whose company Godfrey was. Ma might have known, but she did not.

"I'll give you the play, Felix," announced Godfrey grandly.

"Is she nice?" They hardly heard the inquiry.

"Charming woman," boomed Godfrey. "Charming. Her husband's a dear old pal o' mine. He was with me in 'Maiden Fair' . . . Monty Grainger."

"Oh, married," said Ma.

Felix winked at Godfrey.

"Old image!" he said, affectionately. "I must hurry. I was almost forgetting that *I'm* married."

He took the typed copy of the play from Godfrey and presented himself for Ma's good-night kiss; and within an instant the others heard the closing of the front door. Ma looked blindly at Godfrey, and fell into a state of musing. And in her reverie she sighed deeply, sitting very quiet, close to the fire, her face a mask.

ii

Felix hurried through the gusty evening breeze to his own cottage. It was in darkness. Even when he was indoors he found no light. Nobody was in the house at all. At the first entrance he was at a loss to explain this, but presently he remembered that it was their maid's evening out, and then it came into his mind like a blow

that he had promised to go to Cornwallis Road to dinner. Estelle was with her mother and father, and there was a party at the old home. And instead of coming to the cottage Felix should have been there.

"Oh, *damn!*" he cried, at the knowledge. There flashed through his mind all the consequences—the cold house, Estelle's wounded feelings, his own difficulty over the play . . . He stood within the sitting-room, concern sweeping him. The play was enticing; the fireside still more so . . . "Yes, by God," said Felix, in dry rumination. "I *had* forgotten I was married, hadn't I!"

He looked at his watch, and tramped to the kitchen and the larder, his upper lip curling at the sight of what he found there. If he went immediately to Cornwallis Road there would be food, but no quiet. And he wanted to read the play. He was in a fever to plan its scene and the costumes. A timeless romance, Godfrey had told him . . . A timeless romance . . . Had romance ever a time? It lived in the heart; it was memory of something that had never happened. Felix was greedy to begin reading. He already saw the proscenium; figures already appeared to him out of the shadows of the stage, composing as he imagined them into groups and groupings of lovely colour. What a tempting vision!

"Party! Damn!" he ejaculated. "Who cares for parties . . . How funny she doesn't grow out of parties . . . That kid . . ."

Rambling thoughts strolled about in his head, so pre-occupied was he with the play. Then, with a fire alight and bread and cheese before him, he read the typescript, propping it against the loaf, and munching as he read. Several times during the following quarter of an hour he frowned, murmured, and even laughed at the play, which was written upon the assumption that romance and rodomontade went together. And when the reading was

finished, and his poor supper, Felix drew out his pipe and solemnly smoked it, considering all that he had just read. It was as though he had one of those telescopes to his eye in which children see little coloured crystals changing and re-forming as the telescope is turned. Not figures now, but colours, were in his imagination. He closed his eyes, in order to see them better. And then, with a pencil, drew a sort of square to represent the stage as it would be seen by the beholder. The task was fascinating. He was taken quite out of his own concerns by this attractive opportunity.

At last, soberly, Felix went to wash and make himself presentable for the party; and within a short time he was out again in the blustrous evening. It had begun to rain whenever the wind fell, and as by accident he touched the leaves of a privet hedge with his hand the contact sent a shiver through him.

During the whole journey Felix was thinking of the splendid job he would make of that scene and the costumes. He did not prepare any story to account for his broken tryst. He had forgotten that any tryst had been broken.

iii

In half-an-hour he was in Cornwallis Road, and near the house. And as he came abreast of it and heard the din of a romping party Felix slackened his pace. It was as though a puff of hot air had come through ventilators from the kitchens of a restaurant. He instantly saw the party, the bright lights, the heated girls in their silk frocks, their hair tossed; the men lounging and talking and bursting with noisy high spirits. And Mrs. Ferguson anxious about jellies and custards and sandwiches and drinks—wondering if there would be enough for all who desired them; frightened of torn clothes and curtains and broken

plates and cups and glasses. Mr. Ferguson, straight, soldierly, silently half-drunk . . . He saw everything in advance.

It was a few moments before Felix could make himself heard at the front-door, and then a flurried and over-worked maid admitted him, smiling when she saw that it was Felix and not a further bunch of strangers. He was within doors, and passed upstairs to a room where men's hats and coats were laid out upon a bed and over the backs of chairs and even upon the floor itself. The light here was lowered. From below came the sound of a girl who sang a familiar ballad, and when she finished singing there was a burst of applause and the noise of voices in babble. The party had reached the stage at which applause is given. It would become rowdy in another half-hour. Felix slowly descended the stairs to the hall, slipped into the back room (there were two connecting rooms, the scene of the party), and found everything in accord with the image he had conjured up. The rooms were both very hot, everybody was talking and laughing; chairs were all over the place; tables loaded with food and drink were drawn up under the back window; the centre of the room only was clear. And, as he looked round, it was evident that a dance was to be begun. A pianist was already seated, rubbing her moist fingers with her handkerchief. Partners were being pulled up from their chairs with boisterous happiness; there were little shoutings and private laughs; everywhere was freedom and careless gaiety. Felix drew back, looking for Estelle, whom he could not see. The dance began. Its common, strong rhythm enticed even the leaden-footed males.

At last Felix caught sight of Estelle. She was sitting in the other room, and her dress was a blue to match her eyes. Even in that first glance, Felix could not fail to

notice with pleasure how pretty she was, and how the dress became her. It was cut square across back and front, revealing the whiteness of her neck and arms, and was close-fitting to the waist. As she held herself very erect the picture was enchanting. A short, rather stoutly-built dark man was bending over her, and she was looking up at this man with a glance that Felix knew well. It was old . . . old . . . familiar and attractive, the expression that he had supposed his own. It was arch, laughing . . . There stole into Felix's heart the faintest sense of strain. The whole room seemed to sway, to revolve, so packed was it with moving couples. For Felix the spectacle was too immediately at hand for pleasure; the dancers were as if out of focus. He drew back against the wall, looking from face to face.

Then he saw Estelle rise, give her hand to the dark man, and begin to dance. Almost at once the two passed quite close to Felix, who realised how closely Estelle was permitting herself to be held by her partner. Involuntarily, his brows went up and he shook his head. He glanced moodily at Estelle, secret knowledge of her in his eyes. He was not jealous.

iv

Eighteen months of life with Estelle—life at close quarters—had taught Felix as much about her as he was capable of learning. The rest lay outside the scope of his sympathy. Her smallness, her childish greediness, still amused him. He was not sated, but that was because his own nature was very plastic. Estelle, to this extent, had reason for contentment; the mind, the heart of Felix could embrace her and go farther, seeking other delights. He never bored her, but she sometimes bored herself. Certainly she would have bored Felix if he had been less

fundamentally polite. Estelle did the same things over and over again, like a clockwork man who takes off his hat and bows low, and she had consequently little variety of sensation. Dressing and making love were not the only things she could do well, but they were the only things that roused her interest. Felix was surprised to find how little vitality, either nervous or animal, she had. She lived upon his nervous vitality, and as he had little of the other kind they were for a time well matched. They lived in their tiny cottage, and Felix began to find that he wanted to be other things than his wife's lover. He wanted a wider world to live in than the world of bed and breakfast. With marriage, Estelle gave up drawing and playing the piano. She would never show Felix any of her work, and she was too careless a pianist to feel sure of pleasing him. Her talents had been superficially employed in the past; they were allowed to disappear. What remained? Her beauty, her attractiveness as a woman; and her love of Felix. Were they enough for a lifetime? It was her love that kept her close to him.

As the two of them left the house in Cornwallis Road that night they were accompanied for a short distance by the man with whom Estelle had danced. He was very dark and had a quick, confident bearing which belonged to the vigorous physical health which he evidently enjoyed; but Felix did not care for his close eyes or his manner. His name was Guy Winter. He left the house with them and walked as far as Holloway Road. The night was no longer wet, but the sky was so overcast that all was black above the earth. The wind had gone. It was lowering, and would rain again later. The dampness fell upon their spirits. Estelle held Felix's arm tightly, but she talked all the time to Winter, whom she evidently knew quite familiarly, although Felix had never seen him before. Felix gathered that the stranger was recently

returned from some place in the East, where he said he was "making good," and told stories of his ascendancy over native servants. "You have to treat them as what they are," he said. "— animals." Felix did not after that pay much attention to what was said, because it was all stupid and trivial and forced. Underneath it there was always some current which he did not follow. A kind of sabre-play with past episodes as origin.

"Come and see us," Estelle said to Winter, as they parted. "Come to dinner. You'll brighten us up." She gave her hand familiarly, and allowed it to remain in his clasp while she gave her invitation.

Afterwards, as they walked away, Felix asked:

"Will he brighten us up?" He felt his arm vigorously shaken.

"No, silly. He'll bore you to death. But he'll amuse me."

"Why will he amuse you?" questioned Felix. But she would give him no answer. Instead, with the obvious purpose of changing their topic, she demanded:

"Why were you late this evening? I'm cross with you. You're neglecting me."

Felix told her the great news about the play. Estelle made no reply at all, but walked quietly by his side through the darkness. The hand within his arm was slack. He supposed that she was tired. Only when they reached home, when she was actually in bed, while Felix was undressing, Estelle said:

"Oh, so *that's* why you were late."

"What?" asked Felix.

"What!" mimicked Estelle. "I suppose you're thinking about it now. Dreamy."

"Well, I was," he admitted. "You see, it's such a chance."

"Hn. Ever strike you a girl likes her husband to put her first?"

Felix sat upon the edge of the bed in his shirtsleeves. He had been untying his tie.

"How fortunate you are," he said, "in having a husband who does that by instinct."

Estelle looked at him from the pillow. It was a steady, measuring glance of irony. And then her expression changed. Irony gave place to another feeling altogether. She sat up in bed and put her arms round his neck, her lips fiercely against his own. Then, breathless, still holding him and pressing herself within his embrace, she gasped:

"Are you *still* thinking about it?"

v

Felix made his sketches, and built himself a toy theatre in which to experiment. For an hour, he and Estelle amused themselves with the whole business of fixing a rough version of his design upon the stage in order to see how it would look in reality. Estelle dressed tiny dolls, and walked them across the stage until Felix propped each of them into a suitable position. They had great fun, and laughed and were absorbed; but Estelle tired of the sport suddenly, threw down the dolls in a listless way, and began to read. Felix, detaching himself for a moment from this fascinating pastime, saw that her face was crimson, and drawn as though she were going to cry.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed. "What's up, old girl?" He rose from his place upon the floor, and sat on the arm of her chair, immediately attentive. "Fed up?"

"Yes. Just about fed up," answered Estelle, miserably. "What's the matter with me, Felix? I've got the jumps."

Felix shook his head, unable to account for her mood.

"I can't think. You're not going to have a baby, are you?"

"Good God, no!" She caught his arm at the mere thought of such a calamity.

"Perhaps you *ought* to have one?" he mildly suggested. "I believe they're very good things."

Estelle laughed, punching him.

"You don't know anything about *women*," she taunted, half-seriously. "Oh, dear; I wish I wasn't so fond of you. I'd run away with somebody."

"But why?" asked Felix.

She shook her head, leaning her head against him.

"I don't know," she admitted, in a low voice.

"Because you think I don't love you any longer?"

She gave a start; her hand was put up sharply to his as it lay upon her shoulder. She seemed to breathe more quickly.

"Because I'm unreasonable. I can't bear you to think of anything but me. Only me. I'd like you to want to throttle me, same as I want to throttle you. You used to want to throttle me, you know, Felix. Lovely, when we were first married . . ."

"I've often wanted to bash you over the head for being an idiot," replied Felix, calmly. "But never to throttle you. I wouldn't bruise your neck for anything."

"D'you like it?" she asked languorously. He kissed it. He kissed her white throat, and she lay back in the shelter of his arms, her elbow resting upon his knee. It was thus, to his growing impatience, that all their conversations ended. But her speech had made him quickly anxious. As he was tiring of her passion, that passion was increasing. And Estelle already sensitively dreaded that the old ardent days were gone for ever. They were going, Felix knew. He loved her still, but her instinct was

sound. He loved other things now more than he loved her. It had not hitherto been so. And his other love was not a thing he could control; stifled too long, it was becoming irresistible. The passion he felt for these little puppets upon the toy stage was proof of it. Had Estelle shared that passion, she could have kept him; but she could share nothing but what she had already shared with him. As he grew, she was not growing. Her single desire was intensifying, but there was no expansion of her nature. It was fixed.

And yet the continued happiness of Estelle was his responsibility. It would not have been a problem at all had the two natures been ever so slightly different. Felix was something more—or perhaps only something other—than a lover. Even apart from his consuming eagerness for pictorial and plastic beauty, his nature and his training had given him other interests than the purely sexual. Estelle's sudden confidence suggested that she had none. He was very serious as they continued to sit in the little hot room. Estelle was not less grave.

"Damn," thought Felix. "If she'd only have a baby. Give her something to think about." Even as he said that to himself, momentary hopelessness was added to momentary fear. He knew that this obvious remedy was one which Estelle would not face. She dreaded physical pain with almost morbid vehemence. Felix shook his head again. She was a coward. And he? Was he too a coward, but in another ordeal? He was overwhelmed with dejection.

"You *are* nice," she murmured, as if she were half-asleep. And then, waking: "I shouldn't think there were many men like you in the world, Felix."

"No," agreed Felix, flatly. "There aren't. They generally drown themselves."

vi

A month passed, and six weeks. The designs were accepted. Felix was jubilant. Godfrey was jubilant. Ma was jubilant. Only Estelle had no pleasure in the event. She saw it, not as a triumph, or as a step towards triumph, but as a blow to her power. Guessing this, Felix was the more kind; but there is much difference between the love-making of sweet and pitiful love and the love-making of ardour. Estelle once pushed him savagely away; and then, horrorstruck with remorse and pain, caught him to her once more. She was trying to pretend happiness, trying to pretend that there was nothing between them. It was impossible. She was herself creating the barrier, and she knew it. She knew that real interest in his welfare would have kept Felix forever by her side. That even pretended interest would for a time have served. She knew his loyal heart, his kindness; and there was mania in her blood. She could not feel interest or pretend it. She could only, in her fragile and delicate beauty, pit herself against a passion in Felix which was no less strong. As well attempt the damming of a waterfall; the impetus of this new energy would have carried him beyond all her petty ruses. Jealousy was out of the question: he trusted her. Anger, tears, coldness—these were an unhappiness, but no cure. And Estelle could not rest. She loved him and knew that she was losing him; and she had not the resource to combat her own errors.

As for Felix, he allowed nothing to keep him from her. Something of Estelle's jealousy he just managed to recognise. If he had been less busy with his new work, and with the old work which he must continue to do for livelihood's sake, he might have been more successful in his advances towards a compromise. If they had both been older. If Estelle had ever been taught to give instead of

taking, if Felix had ever been taught to take instead of giving . . .

In one week Felix was detained in town one evening, and the next he spent in doing an urgent piece of work which was needed on the morrow. So much had he on his mind the need for being at home on the third evening that he sent a note to Ma saying that he would not call upon his way home. He reached the cottage, therefore, earlier than usual, to find Estelle really happy. She had put on a new dress for the evening, a lovely dark blue which had come home only that afternoon, and when Felix came into the house a quarter-of-an-hour before his time she knew that he had done it on purpose. He had brought her some chocolates to make up for the two previous evenings, and he was rewarded by her quick-leaping happiness. They sat and munched chocolates after dinner. It was like old times. Estelle was so kind, so affectionate and simple, that Felix cast aside his cares and his preoccupations.

"I thought we might go to a theatre on Friday," he said. "It's a month since we went, and it's like years."

"Mmm," answered Estelle, with a big piece of chocolate-coated nougat in her mouth.

"Where shall we go? Let's have something jolly—if there is such a thing . . ."

They nodded blithely at each other, and began to think with zest of possible theatres. Both were engrossed.

There came a ring at the front door. Estelle scrambled up, her face flushed with disappointment at the interruption of their pleasant evening.

"Oh hang!" she cried, savagely; and went across to the door. "Say we're not at home," she whispered to the passing maid. There was a pause. Neither could help sitting very quiet and listening for the sound of the front door catch and thumping wooden gate. They were

breathless. The maid returned, standing before them like one who brings disaster. She hesitated before she spoke, a tall angular woman with a long grey face and a serious manner.

"If you please, Mrs. Hunter's very ill, and will Mr. Hunter go round at once," she said at last.

Estelle started to her feet. Her face was dark red.

"Oh, my God!" she shouted, shrilly. "Am I *never* to have you!"

Her fists were jerking as she convulsively shook them before her. She was for that time quite bereft of sanity.

vii

That heart which had once caused Ma to faint now was making her seriously ill. There was great cause for anxiety. The days following were heavy with dismay. The two boys met frequently at the cottage, and Godfrey was often there during the daytime. After that one break, Felix continued as of old to call upon his way home, and now he stayed only for as long as was necessary. Often he was in the house for no more than a moment. But at other times, and on Saturdays and Sundays, he would remain by Ma's bedside, talking and giving facetious accounts of small happenings in order to divert the invalid. A nurse was with Ma day and night, and she herself was calmer than anybody else in the family, although they all tried not to spread panic. She lay in bed like a little girl; and only from her eyes and her mouth could it have been observed that she was very ill indeed. As Felix chattered she was entirely still, and he never knew whether she were listening or only exulting in the fact of his company. Her cheeks were flushed, and she had a way of waving one plump hand in greeting which took the fancy of all. It was irresistible.

So for three weeks there was no change in Ma's condition. She was in danger, but none could say at what time the danger might become acute. Godfrey continued to come, and Felix to call, but with anxiety less acute. Day after day there was no news, and no variation in the patient's condition. And one evening, having learned by inquiry at the door that Ma was sleeping, Felix hurried towards home with the prospect of an evening's pleasure in Estelle's company. He had no work to do that night; he was relieved at the news; and if Estelle proved to be equally without cause for concern there would be happiness for both of them. He hastened, bent upon losing no time. And as he turned down towards his own cottage he met a man coming from the opposite direction. It was a dark night, and he could not be certain, but it seemed to Felix that he had seen the figure at the same spot, or very near it, a week earlier. It was that of a heavily built man, shorter than himself. Felix had this passing thought, and forgot it. Only when he was opening the gate of the cottage did he pause. There was a light at the bedroom window. Otherwise the house was in darkness. Something started in his mind with the suddenness of an electric bell. Had he recognised the figure? Had he ever seen it before—at all?

CHAPTER XIX: THE STRONGEST IMPULSE

i

HENDRY, the office boy at Brinksons, always tapped at the door as he entered. He did so now, and Felix, engaged in drawing up an elaborate advertisement for Grindalls' Enamel which showed that it was waterproof, germicide, and everlasting, was at first not conscious of the boy's presence. He continued to work, the glass walls and wooden frames of his cubicle rising around him like the bars of a cage. And at last, tired of waiting in silence, Hendry cleared his throat, which made Felix jump.

"Hullo," he cried, looking at Hendry's putty face and hay-coloured hair with disfavour.

"Tellaphone, sir," observed Hendry, and swung off.

Brinksons in those days had one telephone with two extensions. One of these extensions was to the room of the head of the firm; the other was to the smallest cubicle of all—an airless, breathless tank with a rubber-lined door. It was to this tank that Felix hastened now. The tank was always kept closed, and new air was conveyed to it only in the opening and shutting of the door as anybody who used the telephone came or departed. The atmosphere was asphyxiating.

"Hullo," gasped Felix, shrinking from the evil apparatus with the natural horror of the fastidious. He held the receiver close to his ear, but not against it, so disgusting did the common office telephone seem to him.

A voice exactly like his own sounded from the other

end of the wire. It might have come from Scotland; it might have been Felix talking to himself in a dream. Godfrey always spoke upon the telephone like a small boy who is standing upon tiptoe. To him, a darkened auditorium filled with white faces had no terrors; but the task of speaking into a mouthpiece was immense. He did not shout; he spoke in short gusts, much higher-pitched than usual, and as if under compulsion.

"That you, Felix?" came this singular, breathless voice. "I say, old chap; could you come up here? The doctor thinks you ought to."

Felix was as if stricken with cold. He began to tremble.

"You mean—danger?" he demanded, fiercely.

"No . . . No. The doctor thinks . . . Just come up." The voice died away. There came a numbness into the crackling of the infernal machine, as though the Day of Judgment had arrived and everything was dead.

Felix replaced the receiver and shot out of the telephone-box. At the other end of the office the telephone bell was still whirring and jangling because the main line had not been cleared. He hurried back to his cubicle, frightened. This meant that Ma was very ill. She might, from such a message, be dying. And from the sickness which accompanied his interpretation, Felix heard himself saying over and over again "Healthy Homes. Healthy Homes. Healthy Homes." They were the words he had been writing when Hendry called him to the telephone. They had become so meaningless as to seem unreal. He did not believe there were such words in the language. "Healthy Homes. Healthy Homes."

Felix found that he was trembling. He saw his hand quiver, and watched it stupidly for a moment. He was not thinking. He was only full of the knowledge that Ma lay ill, perhaps dying; and that he must keep his head, as

he had always done, and go to her immediately. Keep his head—yes, keep his head. The words throbbed their way into his attention.

“Yes, by Jove,” he muttered. “And I must get up there . . .”

Mechanically, he put on his hat and coat. To Miss Berridge he appeared quite cool. But he was afraid. He did not dare to think, because he was afraid.

ii

There was silence in the bedroom when Felix arrived there. Godfrey was taking two or three steps across the blue and grey hearthrug and back again, his hands behind his back and his head lowered. Felix knew that Godfrey, although as anxious as himself, was watching his own anxiety with relish, that he was realising and expressing it outwardly in carriage and gesture and that look of gravity with the instinct of his profession. He was not pretending; he was acting. In his own technique he was feeling deeply. The room was quite warm, and although, as the season was winter, the long, darker curtains were drawn at this hour, there was—shaded from the bed—a bright electric lamp-light which as he strode to and fro upon the hearthrug threw Godfrey's figure into relief against the pale grey walls. The nurse was not in the room. Ma was sleeping. Godfrey's movements had all been performed in the most complete silence. He was on guard, as it were; son, nurse, doctor—as strictly conceived and represented as if there had been an audience. And as soon as Felix came in, Godfrey put his finger perpendicularly in front of his mouth, framing “Hush!” with his lips, and stepped across to the door. Felix, with one glance at the sleeper, and at one reassuring nod from Godfrey, allowed himself to be drawn from the room. They

were out upon the brilliantly-lighted landing, and the door was closed. Felix turned immediately, impatient for some explanation. His arm was grasped by Godfrey, who put his lips close and whispered:

"It's all right. Since I telephoned, the doctor has been here again. She's better. She's sleeping. But there was a rather alarming time a couple of hours ago, and he thought—he thought you ought to be here. However, there's no need . . . I would have stopped you. Her lips got very blue—the nurse was alarmed. It was . . . rather alarming. You see, I got here after lunch, and I *must* be back in town by seven."

With all their differences of nature, they understood each other perfectly. Both nodded.

"I'll come back again, then," Felix said. "I can stay all the evening if there's any need."

They had been speaking in whispers; and as they stood thus upon the landing the nurse came upstairs again with whatever she had been down to fetch from the kitchen. She wore a blue nurse's dress and white cap, and with her alertness and kind, comprehending face she was a reassuring figure, most inspiring of trust. Felix stepped aside, smiling. He liked Nurse Higgins.

"Yes, Mr. Hunter," she said, addressing him in her turn, and showing that she had heard what he said, "I wish you *would* come back. The doctor says she's better; but he's afraid . . . She's weaker."

Felix looked down with gratitude at the fresh-coloured face and steady eyes, so used to the contemplation of illness that they were, professionally, almost nun-like in their repose.

"No immediate trouble?" he asked quickly.

There was no answer. From within the bedroom came the sound of a faint groan. When they all entered, they found Ma peering out of bed, as a child might have done.

Her hair had been coiled by the nurse into an unfamiliar bunch, and she looked young, and not old or ill or troubled. At their faces of concern Ma began to laugh very silently, very chucklingly, until her face flushed and she was checked by breathlessness.

"I do have a game with you, don't I?" she cried, quoting Felix of long ago. And, as she said that, she could not help contrasting the Felix of long ago with the Felix of today. She was immediately serious; while they, relieved beyond expression at this cheerful sign of better health, laughed still at the jest. Her dry, small, cracked voice, which was the voice of illness, was forgotten. Their spirits had leapt high in an instant. That ugly hour of fright was obliterated. Thus, always, the Hunters. As Aunt Julie once said, much later, they were in every way shallow. They didn't *understand*.

iii

Felix went home exhilarated. He was again light-hearted, so that he stepped quickly, and as he walked thought of many happy things which moved him and made him laugh. The afternoon had been fine, and in this early evening (for he found it was after five o'clock) he felt the tingle produced by crisp air upon his cheek with something of ecstasy. The sky was very deep. He looked up and up into it, pausing, entranced by its absorbing softness. To see a few stars sprinkled obscurely in that impalpable darkness, to look from the road with its lamps and hedges and paving-stones to that richness of deep colour, filled his heart with rapture. Such a night made him dream incommunicable dreams, that were like a celestial fragrance. Everywhere the clear wind brought sharpness and brilliance to outlines, and quickened the distances into beauty. Even the steps of Felix upon the

roadway, light as they were, had an echo that belonged to this night and the winter, and were a part of his thrilling sense of life.

He went onward, happy; and as he turned into the little road in which his own home lay, he laughed again at the thought of Estelle's surprise when he appeared. She would not expect him for nearly two hours yet, and although he had promised to go back to the cottage later in the evening, the moment for his return lay far ahead. He was here now, and at the gate, and there were hours before them. Felix felt for his key. The wooden gate clumped behind him as it met its post. The keys jingled as he brought them from his pocket. Then he was indoors, wondering why there was no light in the hall, and stepping forward to the switch before taking off his hat and coat.

As the light started into brilliance the door of the sitting-room opened sharply, and he saw Estelle in her pretty green afternoon frock staring at him in astonishment.

"Hul-lo!" she cried. "You! What's the matter?"

Felix kissed her.

"I was called up to the cottage," he explained. "I've been there."

He wondered at Estelle's resistance to his embrace when he would have entered the sitting-room with his arm about her; but when they were past the doorway to his surprise he saw that she had not been alone. Guy Winter was there, standing by the fireplace, very broad and dark and restless. The atmosphere of the room was heavy with cigarette smoke, and against its light tones Winter's smartness was remarkable. He had hair that was oiled, and wore a dark grey tweed suit that seemed just to have come from the tailor's. The diamond ring upon his little finger glittered fierily in the light.

"Oh," said Felix. "I didn't know you had a visitor."

His tone was quite gentle, but it was not acquiescent. "How d'you do?"

"Yes . . . Guy looked in to tea," explained Estelle, rather quickly. "Nice of him, wasn't it?"

"Very nice," agreed Felix.

He remembered that in shaking hands Winter had not met his eyes. He now looked straight at Winter's face, and saw again that the deepset eyes were too close together, which he did not like, and that the well-shaped mouth and heavy black chin were coarse and ugly in conjunction. He did not care for Winter. He did not want him as a friend or as Estelle's friend. There was instinctive hostility. And then he was aware that Winter was not at ease, that he was constantly moving his hands, and changing his position. It was strange that he should be so awkward. He must be unused to visiting . . . He must have some reason for discomfort . . .

"How is your mother?" asked Estelle, cheerfully, stooping to draw her chair a little away from the fire. Felix turned to her, but saw only the back of her head. She had not been looking at him as she spoke. She was busy with her chair, and the cushions upon it. He hesitated before replying, for a thought was struggling in his mind. A thought? A memory . . . And as he hesitated he saw Winter smile uncontrollably. The smile was gone in an instant; but it had not been a smile of amusement. It had been almost a grimace of nervousness. And as the light caught his forehead there was visible a moisture as of sweat. Into Felix's heart came a feeling such as he had never known before. He looked sharply at Estelle. She was unperturbed. She was unperturbed, but he just saw a flying appraisal of himself before she once more turned away. A chill seized Felix. In that single glance, as swift as his own, he detected a gleam of

mockery, but behind the defiance was something akin to terror.

iv

Estelle returned to her chair when Winter had gone, and Felix looked up once or twice, to notice the curious set of her mouth. He had never observed it before. There was a smile which was not a smile; something that was making believe to be a smile and that held no amusement or love or kindness. Her cheeks were rounder than they had been a year before; but she was still the exquisitely fair girl he loved, as light as a butterfly, soft and lazy and delicious. Her green dress brought out her fairness, but even its colour was a defiance to him at this moment.

"Has Winter been here before?" Felix asked, suddenly.

Estelle started. Her face paled. When she spoke, she drawled the words in order to make them appear perfectly natural.

"Yes," she slowly said. "He has."

"You hadn't told me."

"No. I forgot."

A coldness fell upon Felix's heart; his eyes hardened.

"Is he in love with you?"

Estelle leant her face upon her hand; but it was not for support, but for the concealment of her lips. She did not look up. Instead, she raised her shoulder and seemed as if she wished to turn farther away.

"I expect so," she answered flippantly. "It seems probable."

"I don't think you ought to let him come surreptitiously," said Felix.

"Surreptitiously!" The word leapt out.

"When Lottie's not here. It's happened always on the days she's not here."

"How d'you know that?" Estelle's composure was decreased. She was pressed lower in her chair, and the hand had crept farther up her cheek. Still, however, she did not raise her eyes.

"He's got an unmistakable figure. I've met him twice on the way home. Look here, old girl, I don't want to make a fuss about him. I don't like him, but I may not be able to judge. If you want to have him here, do it the decent way. Don't let it seem as though he sneaked in when Lottie's out, and was packed off before I got home."

The pale face was suddenly crimson.

"What d'you mean?" Estelle cried angrily.

"He seemed to me to be in a bit of a funk tonight. He can't possibly be afraid of me unless it's for some reason. He can't, I mean, be physically afraid of me. So I thought he might be trying to seduce you," answered Felix, bluntly. "That's the sort of chap he looks, to me. The sort of man who thinks it's clever to have love affairs with married women."

"Oh, *trying* . . ." said Estelle. She ignored the rest of his speech. "Thank you."

"Don't . . . *don't* be silly," begged Felix. He was a little ruffled, a little indignant and ill at ease. "I see it's impossible for me to say this sort of thing without seeming to suggest that I don't trust you. My dear, I do trust you. I'm not really trying to have a row. I'm not finding fault with you. I hate speaking of it. Only I can't stand that chap. Perhaps I'm only jealous."

Estelle rose to her feet, and faced him. There was no longer any concealment of her expression, which sent a shock through Felix. Her face seemed to be swollen, reddened; and her eyes were dark—full, it seemed, of tears that were withheld by will.

"Jealous," she said, smiling. But when Felix went to

her side she repulsed him. Her body was like steel to his touch. Her voice was very dry. "Funny to hear you talking of being jealous."

"I don't like him."

"Of course you don't." It was like a taunt, a contemptuous taunt. "You couldn't. He's not your sort."

"Nor yours," Felix pleaded. "Estelle."

Estelle gave a little bitter laugh. She seemed to be looking into the far distance, her blue eyes fixed, and her mouth pinched and held in that smile that was no smile.

"Not my sort?" she questioned at last. "My poor Felix, I was engaged to Guy before he left England, before I met you. . . . It was a terrific affair. We had a row the day he went, and I threw the ring in his face." She laughed enjoyingly at the reminiscence.

Felix for an instant was stunned. He hated her—for the boasting, the callous, taunting tone. . . . For no more than an instant.

"What a lucky escape!" he cried. "For you."

His heart was beating very fast. He tried again to draw Estelle to his side, and because she was so much smaller and weaker than himself he could have done this; but her body was rigid, and her face was beyond his reach. He could have kissed her only by force. It would have availed nothing, because in his heart love struggled with secret aversion. He had had a sudden glimpse of a nature coarser than his own.

"I wonder," murmured Estelle. And then, savagely: "Oh, you fool, to trust me. You *fool*."

And with that she began to cry, and was pressed close in his arms, sobbing in agony.

There was now no peace for either of them. Constraint fell like a sword upon such happiness as either was capable of feeling. Whenever Felix kissed Estelle he knew that she shrank a little, as though she could not bear any

contact with him. There was no love-making between them. It was made impossible by Estelle's avoidance. Only she watched him incessantly, white as marble, her lips parched, and upon them that fixed smiling expression which made her so ghastly in his eyes. Her prettiness faded for lack of vivacity. She was cold and bored, and, beneath her boredom, hysterically savage. Felix did his best to behave as though nothing untoward had happened. He talked as usual, came and went as usual, was loving and kind, in the belief that she was ill and would recover; but he was affected by her mood, and made less buoyant than his wont. His constraint, although better concealed, because he was making an effort to conquer it, was greater than hers. His impatience, his anger, suppressed by pity, were as nothing to the hidden agitation which was destroying him. Almost, he could sometimes have struck her for the rude insolence which she supposed to be dignity.

And all the time Estelle did nothing to bring them nearer to each other. It was as though she considered herself as beyond responsibility. She was bored with his attempts to restore an equilibrium; she was in some inexplicable state of inhibited emotion towards him. Often, as if exhausted, she cried in his arms, and finally slept there like a worn-out child. She was morose and unhappy and like a baby in a passion, who will beat her fists against a wall in senseless rage and scratch and kick those who would come to her aid. Once it seemed that she was better, and they laughed together; but the next day that brightness had gone, and the bitter distress that followed was the darker by contrast.

So passed a week. And thus it came to the following Wednesday, when their maid went out during the afternoon and evening; and Felix, upon his way home, delayed a few moments lest he should encounter Winter hastening

from the cottage after a dismissal. Towards Winter he felt loathing and contempt which was the more intense because Winter could be charged with no crime other than the persistence of a hardy and engrossing love. According to his lights, Winter had to be regarded as innocent. And in that case Felix was being merely grotesque in his antipathy. It was a difficulty.

Felix called, as usual, to inquire about the condition of Ma, and found it unchanged since his morning visit. She was no better, and it was evident from the nurse's manner that there was an expectation of death. That it should be delayed for days or weeks was a matter of the physician's skill or skill in nursing. She made no attempt to conceal from Felix what was perfectly apparent to those acquainted with the manifestations of disease. And so, although he was constantly reassured, Felix had here no hope to carry him through his own difficulties. Upon his way home he thought continuously of these. When he was not working, and sometimes even while he was busy, they were inescapable. They were baffling.

In such a position as Winter's, Felix would have made no attempt to seek out Estelle; or, having found her married, would have followed his own course elsewhere. He would have recognised a husband as a creature of feelings and sensitiveness and jealousies like himself. His imagination of the pains of others, so quick and vivid, was incessantly the cause of his apparent sympathy with them. For a time, possibly, he would have been troubled about the duration of Estelle's happiness; but he would have made no attempt to seduce her. It would not have entered his head to do so; for Felix was one of those who desire above all personal gratification the happiness of those they love. But he knew that other men had different conceptions of love and behaviour. They not only

would repudiate his self-discipline and absence of sexual avarice as something priggish and unmanly; but would consider that the pursuit had now an added charm. Winter, to Felix, was an obvious sensualist, a man of active habit, possibly a born philanderer. He looked all these things, and treacherous as well. But although Felix disliked him, he could not find Winter to blame in this situation. The fault lay elsewhere. The person who had acted wrongly—if any wrong could be attributed—was Estelle. If she had not thrown the handkerchief even a man like Winter would have found it impossible to visit her upon days when she was entirely alone. Moreover, Felix would have cared nothing for the visits, if it had not been that their concealment from himself had shown them to be surreptitious. He was bewildered at this unknown element in Estelle; she was not the Estelle he loved, but another, different, creature whom he never could have loved. Did human beings change thus? Or were others blind until such a moment of awakening? Was he himself something other, something incredibly baser and coarser, than his normal thoughts and actions showed? Weak and ungenerous, in truth, he believed himself; but not wholly base. Was he deceived? Felix, not given to serious introspection, was filled with consternation at this thought. It was quickly followed by another. If Estelle was at fault, did not responsibility rest with himself? She was his wife. She was his charge, his care, his beloved. . . . He was appalled.

"Oh, damnation!" shouted Felix, to the stars and the unhearing heavens. He stopped in his walk, his nerves for once out of control, facing this ghastly sense of responsibility. His face was deathly. He was shaking from head to foot. Never had he been so hedged about with trouble; never so full of self-contempt.

V

To go home in this mood seemed to him impossible. Jangled, self-accusing, he might lose temper and discretion. He might abase himself for Estelle's contempt. An evening thus would be unbearable. And so he passed, walking quickly in the night air, among the mists that were rising and filling it with choking dankness. For a time he strode onward, sick at heart, his thoughts in turmoil; and then he turned, lest Estelle, being solitary, should be ill or lonely or afraid. And as he walked back to his home, with a bitter smile still upon his lips, Felix looked a little into the past, at happiness they had shared, and trifles of common understanding which had seemed to him such divine accidents in the accord of two human beings. A softness filled his heart, so that he was ready to love Estelle with all the old sweetness and tender confidence. The sense of strain was passing. His mind was composed; and his thoughts held nothing which could have made happiness between them impossible.

The house was dark as he reached it. No light was anywhere to be seen. There was absolute silence above and below as he closed the front door. He breathed quickly, listening; and his heart sank. There was dread in his glance as he threw open the door of the sitting-room. The room was empty. It had not been used at all that day. The fire, although laid, had not been lighted. So with the dining-room. The bedroom was empty. Felix had run up the stairs so quickly that he felt his heart thumping in his throat. "Strange," he said, twice, wonderingly, afraid. . . . "Strange." And so downstairs again to the dining-room, and out to the empty kitchen, where everything was cold. It was empty; all was brightly polished; still, silent, like a house deserted. Felix shivered. Where was Estelle? Had she perhaps

been called to her father's? Ah, that was the explanation. . . . She had received an urgent summons. . . . He tried to reassure himself. She had gone down to Holloway. Was she returning soon? Was this a further stage in their estrangement? Perhaps she had left some written message?

Felix began to look about the house for some scrap of paper upon which she might have written to him; but he could see nothing. The rooms were all swept and dusted, and no letter was to be seen. He even opened, in his abstraction, the door of her wardrobe. To his astonishment the wardrobe was bare. The walls met his eye; no dresses hung there. His eyes went instantly to the dressing table. His heart seemed to stop beating. He moistened his lips, which were suddenly dry. He stood quite still, his hands dropped to his sides. Already he knew—he knew what he would find, presently, in some place where she had left it. He was stifling; his face was ashen, and his eyes had sunk deep within the pallor of his cheeks.

"A letter. There must be a letter," Felix said, in a hard, unmoved voice. "She's written. There *must* be a letter." He groped his way to the door. His voice had been false; his words were false. Deep in his heart, bitterly, he was without hope. He needed no letter, no message. The truth was known to him.

CHAPTER XX: SACRED AND PROFANE LOVE

i

THE letter, when he found it lying upon the table in his studio, was what Felix had expected.

"Dear Felix," he read. "I have gone with Guy. It is no good going on. I'm no good. He'll give me what I want, so don't worry. I've already been unfaithful to you—the first time he came to the house. You're too good for me. Funny, isn't it. I did love you. It just went suddenly. Estelle."

And below: "Not your fault."

The last words were smeared: they had been added as with shaking hands she folded the paper of farewell.

Felix read through the words over and over again, throwing the letter down and picking it up again. "Not his fault." Was it not? "Too good for her." What did she mean? "Not his fault?" It *must* be his fault. At last, replacing the letter upon the table where he had found it, Felix began to walk about the studio. He was frantic with distress. No blame, no anger was in his mind; but horror and pity and stupefaction. His girl, his Estelle, with another man . . . with Winter of all men. . . . It was incredible. Incredible. And yet it was true. The letter was there to prove it. She had preferred Winter to himself. He shuddered. But in what way had he failed her, that she should take Winter for want of a better? In what way? He could not imagine

his fault. What fault was there that could not be forgiven by a loving woman? Or had she *never* loved him? Had it been Winter all the time? Himself an attraction. . . . He had thought their love a bond. He had thought it as true as steel. And it was over. It was over, and Estelle was gone . . .

The thought of her softness in other arms; of the caresses that sprang, not from love, but from hot, ravenous desire, so quickly sated, was unbearable. Winter was like an animal, a sinister cat, watchful of the female, intent upon a single purpose. . . . Unbearable. He could not keep still. He was beside himself, walking in the cramped space, exclaiming, imagining. . . . Estelle, tired of Winter, but in the grip of passion; Winter tired of Estelle; both seeking always novelty and excitement and self-gratification where most easily it could be found. Winter free to continue endlessly his almost professional exploits with human vanity; and Estelle, tethered by her sex, shunned, defiant, coarsening, losing dignity and beauty and self-respect. . . . The pictures were too horrible. They were fevered, the first hot outcome of a disorder produced by shock. But they were overwhelming. He was at the end of his endurance. He was fainting.

Struggling for breath, Felix reached the open air, and felt the night wind keen upon his face and hands. He awoke. Useless to stay here. He must act. He must decide at once what to do. First he must see Roland Ferguson, the only one of Estelle's brothers whom he trusted. Roland would help him. He would know where Winter had been living, and might be able to advise as to the possible movements of the two. Yes, that was what Felix must immediately do. He must go straight to seek Roland. Blind, weary, without sense of his action, he re-entered the studio, found the letter and folded it and put

it in his pocket. There was much to be done. He must not lose an instant.

ii

And as in the darkness he went along the short road in which his home had been, past all the other little houses with red brick walls and lighted front windows, Felix remembered that he had promised to go back later in the evening to see Ma. He hesitated. His present errand was urgent enough. He could not delay. He *must* not delay. And yet he was so accustomed to keeping his promises that in the end he could not pass the cottage. There were the strongest reasons for going in. Godfrey, he knew, could not be there in the evening, because he was appearing in the West End; and Ma had no old friends who might have come to show kindness to a dying woman. They had all been lost long ago, in the days of poverty, when Ma had been too proud to claim their assistance or to make known to them the want in which she was living. Ma was alone in the world with Godfrey and Felix. This was the end of her life, and she was alone. He turned aside, therefore, and went up the steps of the cottage, and through the door, and into the lighted hall. The living-room was in darkness, but the kitchen door was open, and he could see a light there.

But the kitchen was empty, and as Felix came back along the passage with the intention of going upstairs, he heard Elsie's steps above him. She was running quickly down the stairs with her clumsy attempt to be quiet; and he saw that she was wearing her hat and thick overcoat, as if to go out of doors. Her whole manner at sight of him was agitated, as though she were greatly excited. He even saw that she was pale. Her eyes were bright. Seeing Felix she stopped upon the stair, cried out, and her hand was jerked forward towards him.

"I was just comin' for you," she gasped. "They want you. Up there."

"God!" Felix threw off his coat, and hastened up the stairs. He was inside the door of Ma's bedroom within an instant, and had noiselessly closed it behind him, so that he stood with his back against the cream panel. The room was only dimly lighted, and it seemed to be dusk there; but in the twilight the doctor and the nurse were both bending over the bed. At Felix's entrance the doctor turned, and with a grave warning of silence motioned him quickly forward. Ma lay very still. She seemed nothing at all in that bed, her face all that was visible, very white and exhausted. At a glance Felix knew that this was the end. She was hardly conscious, and only when he took her hand was there the slightest sign of vitality. A quiver shook her arm, and the pressure was gently returned. She opened her eyes, and looked at him with a tired, loving glance.

"My dearie!" she whispered. It was hardly audible. He bent closer. Painfully, she struggled to speak. "You . . . all right?"

"Splendid!" cried Felix in a convincing voice. "Everything fine. . . ."

A little smile stole across Ma's face, and her eyes closed again. She was happy.

Even as Felix stood there, the hand within his clasp lost all feeling. It relaxed, and lay without life. There was the sound of a soft sigh, a tremor. . . .

The doctor nodded, and the nurse went closer. It was over.

"She's gone," said the doctor.

Felix remained staring. He no longer held Ma's hand. He did not realise what had happened. He stood beside the bed with his eyes wide open; but he was not conscious.

iii

Only later, when he came to himself, Felix found that he had suffered two losses within the hour. He was still in the dimly-lighted grey bedroom, with the doctor and the nurse; but he could not see Ma. She was there, hidden. She was dead. He knew it now—dimly and feebly; and knew nothing else. He caught at the rail at the foot of her bed, sick and weak. The strain had been too great. But he was better in a moment, and the doctor, seeing that he had somewhat recovered, began to talk in a low tone, for the purpose of distracting Felix from thought of what had just happened. His voice went on and on, breaking those tragic knowledges towards which Felix was groping, and forcing irrelevancies into the terrible preoccupations with which the sick mind was engaged. It became unendurable.

"Doctor . . . doctor. . . . Do, for God's sake, *stop!*" cried Felix.

He was gasping for breath. The perspiration was trickling from his brow. Deadly physical sickness seemed to rush upon him. The twilight became darkness, and the sound of the sea at night was in his ears.

"Hullo, hullo; he's off. Mind, nurse. . . ."

There was a long pause before Felix, with the smell of brandy in his nostrils, began to awaken once more to consciousness. He was lying at full length upon the floor, and staring straight upwards. The ceiling, far away, was a mass of the strangest, unseizable sparkling grey and silver and golden molecules. It was like a dream. And then he felt that his head was throbbing. It was aching terribly. But he saw the nurse and doctor above him, standing, watching his face. The sight filled Felix with embarrassment.

"I say!" he cried feebly. It was humiliating, shame-

worthy. "I *am* a juggins. I'm awfully sorry to be such a nuisance." And with that he attempted weakly to struggle to his feet. "I'm ashamed to be such a nuisance. I can't think. . . ."

iv

The doctor was talking again. He was always talking. He was a short, round-faced man who wore glasses and looked like a cherub in a painting by Rubens—very corpulent and rosy-gilled. But behind his glasses there were two seeing eyes. He watched Felix while he talked.

"You want a bit of looking after yourself," he said.

"Ugh," replied Felix, in a stupid tone, as if to say "Not I."

"I mean it," retorted the doctor. They were sitting downstairs now, in the blue room with the cream-coloured curtains; and a fire burned near them in the grate. "You're out of sorts, and you've had a lot of worry; and no doubt you've been working too hard, which is what you artist fellows tend to do unless you're watched by chaps like me. And in fact if you don't take care you'll crack up. I'm bound to talk straight. You don't want to be fit for nothing at all, do you?"

"I don't quite know *what* I want, doctor," said Felix, drearily, with a singular expression upon his face. "I can't make up my mind."

"Whoo!" cried the doctor, with humorous impatience. "That's the faintness still working in you. You'll find out soon enough. You owe it to your mother not to be too much upset. She wouldn't have liked it. She was always very keen to prevent your being alarmed. She thought a great deal of you and your brother. She worried about you—you especially." The doctor was speaking with his usual bluntness, but he looked inquisitively at Felix's white face. "Worried, you see. When I came to

see her I'd find her down. I couldn't understand it at first; but later I tumbled. . . . Very keen on your happiness."

"Yes, doctor. I know she was," cried Felix. His exasperated resentment of the doctor's talk was returning. He could not keep still. He felt that unless he could be quiet and alone he must burst into a fit of sobbing. There was a swelling in his throat, and his body seemed all to be soft, as though it was full of water; and the doctor kept on talking as if nothing would stop him.

"I thought she'd last longer. This evening there wasn't any sign of this when you called before, I'm told. But about half-an-hour afterwards she had a bad attack. Called out your name, and collapsed."

"My name?" asked Felix, startled into attentiveness.

"Your name," said the doctor.

"Half-an-hour after I was here?" asked Felix.

His lips trembled for an instant. Then he stood erect.

"Curious, isn't it," said the doctor. "Called out your name. . . . Sort of horror. They sent for me, of course, I didn't think it would come so soon. . . . Shall I telephone to your brother when I get back?"

"I wish you would," said Felix, gratefully. But he was not thinking about telephoning to Godfrey. He was thinking of Ma's great love for himself. His head was bowed.

PART FIVE: BEGINNING AGAIN

CHAPTER XXI: THE RAID

i

SUPPOSING, my dear Jacob," said Felix; "supposing for a moment that you ever finish your great series of works on the Miasmas of our time—the moral miasmas and the social miasmas, the philosophic, psychological—with special reference to the Freudian miasma, which seems, if I may say so, to be clouding your own intellect at this unfortunate moment,—the ethical, religious, and various sporting miasmas which you haven't yet quite fully grasped——"

"The sporting come under Social," interrupted Jacob. "Sections and Sub-sections."

"How right of them, Jacob; how right of them! Always sporting! You have seen, I am sure, that the sporting miasmas are a part of the general culture——"

"They're a part of the general miasma," said Jacob.

The two were sitting in Felix's studio near Fitzroy Square, and it was war-time. The studio was a large square room with skylight and a big northern window, and its walls were high and plastered and papered brown; and it was furnished with a bed and table and two arm-chairs and the plain necessities of the artist. Jacob was in the uniform of a private in the infantry, while Felix was in ordinary clothes of considerable age and comfort. Felix had offered himself to the Army in the early days of the war, not in hatred of the Germans nor in love of combat by arms, but because he saw no reason why, as others were risking and sacrificing their lives, he should

not do the same. But for some reason the Army did not want Felix. I suspect that they did not trust him. They found defects in his eyes, in his legs, and in his heart. His heart, he assured them, beat rather rapidly and unsteadily from a fury of patriotism; his eyes were good enough to see camp-rubbish with; his legs were entirely serviceable. He was indignant that there should be disdain of his legs. They were fine, well-shaped legs. It was not denied. It was even admitted. They were most agreeable and muscular legs. But some bone in his knee would not pass the doctors. They gathered to admire it. They directed attention to its splendours. They had never seen a finer bone, they said; but they did not want Felix in the Army. And yet, Jacob, of whom none of these things were said, because his bones were entirely commonplace, assured Felix that half the men in his company were spavined, varicocceled wrecks of humanity, with sores upon their bodies and an incredible load of ailments upon their persons. "To tell you the truth, Felix," he said candidly, "You're a prince to some of them. I never realised how healthy you and I were until I went into the Army. But keep out of it. You're better where you are, keeping up the moral of the nation." "Its morals," replied Felix, "are in greater danger than its moral. However, you may leave both to me." "Both what?" asked Jacob. "Both morals, of course. They have the same generic name; but they are in reality two—male and female. However, this is a mystery, which is beyond your miasmic intellects."

And so Jacob had gone into the Army, and he was now home on leave; and his wife was expecting a baby, and he had come to tell Felix the news. It was already the time for air-raids, and Felix lived in the studio with the glass roof nearly in the centre of London. He was very frightened when the air-raids occurred; but he went

on working in his studio during their course because he was still more frightened if he was in company with other people in a shelter. The crowd, the fear, the smells and discomforts, were worse to him than the danger of annihilation. In the studio he could die once; in these crowds he died a thousand times. And so when the first bangs of the defensive guns sounded, Felix swore explosively and continued to work. The whole of the war seemed to him stupid and futile; and in no particular was it more stupid or more futile than in that of air-raids. But in that matter Felix was conventional, and thought no differently from those directly above whose houses all the air-battles regularly and by miracle took place. He knew nothing about the war but the details which were published in the newspapers and those which received even greater publicity by word of mouth—until the time when he was used by the Government as a military artist, when he knew even less than he had known before.

Felix in the two or three years that followed his divorce had worked very hard. He was a recognised artist by the time that war was declared, and in fact the declaration of war ruined an exhibition of his work which was held in the first week of August, 1914. The pictures which had been exhibited upon that occasion were still in the studio in which he and Jacob now sat, and had their faces continuously to the wall. He called them his Still Lives, for an obvious reason. They were not his best work, but none of his work was the best he could do. None of his work has ever been the best he could have done. And yet he was then—as he is now—a recognised artist; because the truth is that very few men ever produce their best work. They are unable to do so. Their skill is not equal to their talent, and their talent is not equal to their ambition. They cannot grasp the vague and misty visions that are glimpsed upon clear nights, and upon summer

days, and in the falling of a leaf or the movement of the sea, in the nightingale's song or the smell of burning wood. Always there is something that is just missed. Felix was no exception to the rule. He was no genius. He was too facetious to be a genius. And he had not that hard self-esteem which many groundlings mistake for genius in the self-elect. But he was a good working craftsman, and even craftsmanship is a thing of note in these days. His popular reputation rested then upon his full-page humorous drawings in illustrated weeklies; his æsthetic reputation upon his broad and rather bizarre costume-design and stage-scenes; while some small landscapes had been accepted as tolerable by a number of his fellow-artists and by the syndicates who write art criticism for the newspapers. He had thus a most striking trinity of reputations, and was earning his living without reference to Brinksons, for whom he still made—at a price—occasional designs.

"At any rate, supposing you ever finish the whole series of your works upon the miasmas of our time," Felix remarked—continuing the conversation with Jacob which has been interrupted by these explanatory comments upon his character and his situation; "I suppose you'll really settle down to bringing up your young."

"I shall try," cautiously answered Jacob.

"Watching their complexes, I suppose. Analysing their infant dreams. Teaching them the facts of life by examples drawn from the flowers; and so on. I can just imagine your young, Jacob. Filled with the facts of life. They won't be asked out to children's parties. You'll have to remove them from schools. They'll begin so wise in physical science and the rest of it—including the facts of life—that no mother will have them near her own chicks."

"What does that matter?" asked Jacob, defiantly. "They'll have each other's society."

"Not very social, you'll think."

"Well," said Jacob. "I don't mind about that. If people choose to shun those who've been properly brought up, the loss is theirs. Though I'm bound to tell you, Felix, that I'm a bit suspicious of Letty's ideas on the subject of children. You see, she was let run wild, and all her brothers and sisters the same. She talks about healthy bodies and not stuffing their minds with——"

"With what?" The question was natural, for Jacob had checked himself abruptly.

"She calls it nonsense," admitted the philosopher.

Felix roared with laughter, and even Jacob smiled, sitting there in his badly-fitting uniform, his belt off and his tunic unfastened, and his big Army boots sticking out in front of him like barges. And the more Felix thought of the admission the more he laughed, because in all the time of his marriage (it was clear) Jacob had not educated Letty by so much as a hairbreadth in the true virtue of his social theory.

"It's a case of invincible ignorance," declared Felix. Jacob sniffed.

"Obstinate stupidity," he amended.

"Then there are two of you, my old porker. However, I see that your children will be thoroughly decent, nice children. Letty will see to that. You may bring them to visit me once a year."

"Considering they're not any of them born yet," grumbled Jacob, "I think you're running on too fast. Wait till I've got half-a-dozen; and then you'll change your tune. Won't be so free with your invitations. But if you're so keen on the education of children——"

"I'm not. I'd let them bring themselves up. Then they could only blame me for the facts of life. And we

all know they're beyond human control. Vide Freud and others."

"——why don't you have some children yourself?" Jacob completed his inquiry. "Why don't you marry again?"

"Why, as to that," said Felix, flushing, "I wish I could do so."

And with this remark he became so silent that Jacob pondered.

ii

"It isn't," resumed Jacob, "as though you were an old man. You *ought* to marry again." Felix smiled. "Don't you think so?" questioned Jacob. "It's only a question of making up your mind."

"To tell you the truth, Jacob," said Felix, and with that beginning Jacob knew that he was going to lie; "I'm rather hard to please. Fastidious, you know."

"Rot," said Jacob. "You're too lazy."

• "And I'm very happy here with Mrs. Ronald to look after me. Mrs. Ronald is the finest charwoman in the world. Not much as to cleaning, but as a personality first class."

Felix began to talk about Mrs. Ronald, but Jacob paid no heed. His mind kept coming back to this question of Felix's happiness; for Jacob was an honest, sturdy fellow, and the fear of death makes one think at times a little more openly than in ordinary circumstances one would care to do. Jacob loved Felix. He had the sturdy man's affection for one more wayward. He saw Felix as something brilliant. It was his illusion, and we know better than Jacob; but the belief gave him a strong interest in that part of Felix's life which not all who run may read. So, taking the privilege of the day, as Sam Weller did in his valentine, Jacob suddenly asked:

"D'you hear anything of Estelle now?"

"I hear sometimes," answered Felix, evasively.

"From Roland?"

"From Estelle."

Jacob gave an exclamation. He was alarmed.

"For God's sake . . . She's not coming back, is she? Oh, don't *think* of it!"

"Shut up, you old ferment," cried Felix. "No, she's not coming back. But she's left Winter, and I'm afraid she's unhappy. I don't quite know what to do about her. She's a problem."

"She'll get back! She'll get back!" groaned Jacob, in consternation.

"No, that's finished."

"Nothing's ever finished with a woman."

"Wrong, Jacob," retorted Felix. "Old-fashioned. You *are* old-fashioned, you know. All this muck you get out of psychological text-books is old-fashioned. Real life is ahead of books, and a lot more interesting. I should have thought you knew that for yourself. It's your *business* to know it. How can you teach children the facts of life if you don't know them yourself? They'll laugh at you, my porker. Your young will deride you. No gooseberry bushes and strawberry beds for *them*."

Balked, Jacob looked askance at his friend. He saw Felix brighter and better in health than he had been at any time during the last four years; and yet Felix's face was thin and his grin was somehow sadder than when Jacob had last been on leave. You cannot endure much unscarred.

"I can't make you out, Felix," Jacob grumbled. And with that he looked very straight at his friend, without, however, being able to detect any sign of embarrassment or perturbation in the agreeably undistinguished face of

Felix. It is maddening for a philosopher to be baffled. "Damn you!" he cried, with exasperation.

iii

Had Jacob seen Felix less than two hours later walking briskly through the mysteriously dark streets north of Oxford Street, blackened to make the face of London uniformly grey when seen from the air, and then waiting beneath the shaded lights at the main entrance to the Georgian Music Hall, he would have watched more closely. He would have expected, perhaps, to see Estelle. Every small figure that slipped beneath the shaded lamps would have invited his attention. And yet Jacob would have been wrong. It is a part of life that when a man or a plant or a river is foiled at one point it will seek another outlet; which explains all marriages and liaisons "on the recoil," as well as other things. It was not Estelle whom Felix thus attended. Far otherwise. Punctually at six o'clock he was joined by a tall girl in a Paisley coat. A sort of peaked helmet was upon her head, and beneath the peak could be seen a young roguish face that was as broad as it was long. The owner of the Paisley was not short, as Estelle had been; she was in every way unlike Estelle; and yet Felix, within three years of Estelle's departure, was in love with the young woman in the Paisley. There was little, even in his love, that resembled his love for Estelle. It was a different sort of love, and something on the whole better, because he now loved for character, which is the only true thing to love for. He felt protectiveness, and pride in Miss Paisley's quaint prettiness and her beautiful, lissom movements; but she was not a passionate, exciting pet, as Estelle had been. Instead, she had a sort of grace of the mind which made Felix tranquil in her presence. He did not know her

very precisely; there was too much to be learned in less than a lifetime; he was still, as it were, appreciating her sweetnesses. And there were other things, less sweet, of whose existence he was already aware, but as to which he was behaving with circumspection. When Felix and the Paisley were seated side by side in the music-hall, in stalls close to the exit door, he was happy. He cared nothing for the performance, which, indeed, was a negligible business, but he was content to sit beside Mary Howard in her Paisley as if that were to be his place in Paradise.

For one thing, Mary had some of the qualities of a boy. It was not for these that Felix loved her; but it was for these that he respected her. She had two clear eyes, as frank as his own, an adorable little nose that seemed a different shape every time Felix caught sight of it, and round cheeks of rose pink. And her face held such intelligence that he supposed she understood every word he said, which was quite impossible, as Felix talked a great deal of nonsense. However, it seemed to him that Mary, in regard to nonsense, came into the third of three categories of women which Felix had established. The first did not understand nonsense at all, and took it seriously; the second searched it for bitter satire of themselves; and the third (among whom might be found Mary) knew that at any rate it was nonsense, and was to be answered as nonsense. And, as Mary had a fund of nonsense in her own gift, the two did very well. They talked nonsense together.

Mary was the daughter of a North-country schoolmaster who was recently dead. She had no relations in the world except an aunt who loved her with adoration, and it was with this aunt that she lived. And as the aunt was very frightened of air raids it was essential that Mary should leave the Georgian Music Hall at eight o'clock

in order to be home before there was any danger of a raid occurring. It would be Felix's task after the performance to pilot her through the darkened streets to Baker Street, so that she could travel by train to Willesden, where she lived. These two never dined together, because Mary worked in an office near by the Georgian, and did not leave until six. They knew each other because one day a man had shown Felix some small, delicious black-and-white drawings of forest scenes, which he declared to be the work of a young genius. And the young genius was Mary.

She was quite modest about this gift, because it was her real gift. She was less modest about other gifts, which she possessed in common with other girls. And it had come into Felix's head to wonder whether, if she would learn more about the craft for which she had such aptitude, she might not learn at last that drawings of forest scenes may be made best of all in the company of one who is also adept in the drawing of forest scenes. Is that a very roundabout way of putting it? Felix was in love with her, and he also loved her (which is a different feeling altogether) very deeply and truly; and when he did not return very clear answers to Jacob upon the subject of marriage it was because he loved Mary Howard in these two distinct and incalculable ways. He knew that for Mary's sake he must make sure that he was the best available husband for her, so that he should not spoil her life, and so that they two, looking eternally upon scenes that evoked the ecstasy of the artist, might share the secret of beauty between them.

iv

There were endless songs and dances in that packed, enormous building. There were playlets also, and one

woman singer dressed in male costume sang four songs one after the other. Most of the performers were good-hearted people with a kind of loud honesty and a stereotyped cleverness; but none of them was really amusing or original, because the day of the original and amusing music-hall artist is past. Nevertheless, Mary and Felix (perhaps because they were together and were eagerly interested in each other) enjoyed every "turn," and applauded it gaily whether it was poor or appreciable. The time went on; and Mary smoked a cigarette and spoke occasionally in her hoarse little voice. Felix could see a small curl rolling down from her temple, and from the way Mary touched this small curl from time to time he knew that it was her temporary pride and joy, and that she was equally concerned with its parallel which was suspended from her other temple. And yet in these movements there was no self-consciousness, but only a naïve satisfaction in a cunning achievement.

And as they sat thus, above the music and racketting of the orchestra, Felix's sharp ears caught a sinister thud. Almost at that instant, Mary turned to him and said:

"What's the time? D'you think we'd better go now?"

As they were at the end of a row near one of the exit doors it was easy to creep out unobserved; and by the time they reached the door they both heard another ominous thud, and a third. They turned to each other. Felix's heart was like water, not from personal fear but from fear upon Mary's account. He was horrified at the thought that he had brought her into danger. He trembled.

"Was that . . . something?" Mary whispered, as if she dared not think it true.

"Afraid so," Felix acknowledged. He in his turn did not dare to look at her for an instant. Mary's face turned white. As they were now beyond the auditorium they

could stop and listen. Thud, thud . . . thud, thud, thud . . . thud . . . Unmistakable. Felix turned to a commissionaire. Other people were walking unconcernedly upon the stairs, evidently deaf to these noises, or without fear of their significance.

"Is there a raid on?" he asked, in a low voice.

The commissionaire backed to the wall, looking surreptitiously at those who were near, and giving cautious glances of warning at Felix. He was a little alarmed, but his duty was to prevent a panic; and he was upheld by his duty.

"I'll tell *you*," he muttered. "Keep it dark. See? Yes, there is. You can't go out. Best thing's to go up to the saloon. Part of the roof's concrete. You'll be all right there. Only, don't make a . . . see what I mean?"

In his heart Felix was afraid . . . afraid. He must not be afraid. His heart was fluttering; his mouth was dry. But the fear was physical only: his head was clear.

"Damn it, I *mustn't* be afraid," he muttered. "Simply *mustn't*. And then, at sight of Mary's white face, he was filled with such compassion that his mind had no room for any other thought. "It's all right," he whispered. "Nothing to worry about. Keep up your **courage**. We'll go up to the saloon. Be quite safe . . ."

He took her arm, and then her hand; and she laid her other hand upon his. For both, the contact was sweet, reassuring; but to Felix it was a new, precious delight. And, so clasped, they went together up the wide, palatially carpeted stairs, brilliantly lighted and vulgar, but to Felix at this moment stairs of such promise that he sang praises to them. His fear was gone. A kind of amused sense of himself pretending to be a brave man took its place. He was curiously pleased and touched that he should be able to pretend bravery because he loved Mary. It was only a pretence, and yet it was sincere, so

much did she evoke his quality. And when he saw the gratitude and trust with which she looked at him, Felix loved her the more for being so ready to be deceived by his poor mimicry of courage.

They mounted the stairs in silence, and reached the saloon. It was a huge place, like a hall, with pillars, and crimson velvet carpet and curtains, and small glass-topped tables and wicker chairs. Felix thought, "My God, what a smash there'd be!" But he did not think aloud. He was silent. The saloon was almost empty, because most of the people in the hall had not heard the thuds, and were sitting on, absorbed in the show, deaf to danger. Here the noise of bombardment was louder, more unmistakable. He saw Mary's face whiten again; she trembled, and held his hand still; but she kept her nerve. Felix adored her. He was more and more proud of her, because she was in fear so sweet. His love and pity overwhelmed every other feeling. Then :

"Look here, I'll get something to fortify you," he said.

"Some coffee," whispered Mary, and looked at him like a child.

Felix left her at a table in the large crimson velvet covered saloon, and hastened across to the bar, where were some people standing talking in murmurs, all rather shaky, beside the bar, their eyes melancholy with the same fear that Felix felt. . . . One of them was the chief barmaid. To her he addressed himself.

"Could I have a couple of coffees?" Felix smiled at her ingratiatingly, as if to coax the coffees from a stony heart.

She shook her head, unmoved by his smile. But she was kind.

"No, I'm sorry. Kitchen's all glass, and the devils are right above us. I *can't* ask them to go out there. . . ."

"Hell!" thought Felix, trembling. "Hell and damna-

tion. Fool that I was to let her come." He was deeply troubled, and full of self-blame for his thoughtlessness. But then, knowing that all the thought was useless:

"Give me a couple of brandies. . . ." And again, to himself: "You fool. You *fool*. To bring her into danger when you love her so. It's like you. It's like you. Always. Damn!"

He hurried back with the two glasses of brandy, to find Mary shivering, and looking inclined to cry, as though she had heard what the barmaid had said. Felix sat down and pulled up a chair beside her, grinning reassuringly. His heart sank, at the trial. It was one thing to be afraid himself; it was another to allow Mary to be afraid. He dreaded lest she should lose her nerve, and faint, or cry, or cling to him. And so he grinned again, while the brandy choked her; and then handed over his cigarette case and lighted a cigarette for her.

"May as well make ourselves comfortable," he said, with painstaking unconcern.

"Yes—oh, what's *that*?" She half sprang to her feet as a deep roaring crash, which seemed quite near at hand, drowned everything. Felix knew that it must be a bomb. He knew that at any instant such another crash might end their lives. It was intolerable. He saw horror growing in Mary's eyes, a fear, a panic. At all costs that must be stopped. At all costs.

"The whole thing's ridiculous," he cried. "It's such a farce, isn't it? All this uncomfortable feeling we have, because of a bang. Only nerves: nothing decently in the way of alarm. It's the noise really, not the danger, that makes us feel sick. There's practically no danger at all, you know."

"No?" Again she looked at him like a child, and their hands sprang together. The warmth began to steal back to her cheeks, and the trustfulness to her eyes. She was

caught up in the inexhaustible loquaciousness of Felix. Thud, thud, thud . . . overhead . . . thud . . . thud, thud. Louder, louder. . . . Felix was desperate. He must go on talking. He must go on talking and talking until the bomb fell which might destroy both and mash them to bloody fragments.

"I will now," he said, with a supreme effort to master his excitement, "I will now tell you the story of my life."

Entirely absorbed, Mary frowned for an instant, forgetful of the thuds.

"Oh, but haven't I heard that?" she objected.

"This is another one," said Felix. "Listen!"

THE END



